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COME SEVEN



STAVUS ROY COHEN

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SHORT

STORY

COLLECTION



WILLIAM WARD PRESOTT

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WIN



**SHE EMITTED A BLOODCURDLING YOWL AND
THREW STRONG ARMS ABOUT THE NECK OF
DOLPHUS MCQUARTER**

Page 42

COME SEVEN

BY
OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

Author of "Polished Ebony," "The
Crimson Alibi," etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
H. WESTON TAYLOR



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1920

**TO
MY FATHER**

At 11:30, 1933

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**TO
MY FATHER**



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COME SEVEN

WITHOUT BENEFIT OF VIRGIE

A LARGE black woman and a little brown man scuttled from the coloured waiting room amid a shower of rice and old shoes. The amazonian bride took the lead and held it. The skinny diminutive groom wrestled valiantly with two overlarge suitcases. The erstwhile wedding guests howled with delirious joy and imparted advice loudly and liberally.

The score of white folks who had been waiting long and impatiently at Opelika for the arrival of the northbound Seminole Limited delayed boarding the train that they might miss none of the bridal hilarity. Even the conductor forgot that he had time to make up, and a grin supplanted the harried expression he habitually wore. The bride was first on the coloured coach. She stood on the platform and beckoned imperiously to her lord and master.

“C'm on, heah, you Lazarus! Dawg'd if'n you ain't the hesitatin'es' man!” The puffing, panting bridegroom raised docile eyes to his mammoth wife.

" Ise comin', honey; but these suitcases is pow'ful heavy."

" Huh! "

The woman was on the ground in a stride. She seized the suitcases and whirled them lightly to the platform. Then she strode triumphantly down the aisle of the coach, followed by her meek and adoring spouse. The Afro-American passengers, roused momentarily from the lethargy begotten of a tiresome journey northward from Jacksonville and intermediate points, turned grinning faces toward the couple. The revellers from the wedding feast ganged outside the window and chorused unintelligible advice.

Came the raucous "Bo-o-o-ard!" of the conductor; the iron monster at the head of the train puffed, snorted and got under way. The cars trembled and forged toward the open country. The honeymoon of Mr. and Mrs. Lazarus Posey had begun.

The bride and groom occupied a seat amidships — she resplendent in an Opelika-bought coat suit of turquoise, a gayly plumed hat of navy, and heavy black shoes topped modestly by near-silk checkerboard stockings. The shrivelled groom was lost in the folds of an enormous overcoat — wedding gift from the bride.

The train gathered speed. The bridal couple stared straight ahead, painfully conscious of the fact that they were the centre of attraction. But,

as they gave no immediate overt demonstrations of matrimonial affection, the other passengers quickly lost interest, abandoned hope, and turned their gazes once again to the sear autumnal landscape.

Despite the crisp snap of late September, the atmosphere within the car was oppressively close. Virgie, maternally solicitous for the physical well-being of her recent matrimonial acquisition, turned soft eyes upon him and gave advice.

“Whyn’t you take off that they ov’coat, Lazarus?”

He surreptitiously pressed her large powerful hand.

“I’d ruther keep it on, Virgie, ’cause’n you gave it to me.”

The rattle of the wheels settled into a rhythmic clackety-clack-clack-click; the bridal couple relaxed their self-conscious rigidity and leaned back against the velvet cushions. Instinctively they inclined toward each other until their shoulders touched and hands clasped warmly. Lazarus shivered deliciously.

“We is ma’ied, Virgie!”

“Sho’ is! Is you glad, Lazarus?”

“O-o-oh! Hon!”

“I mean hones’-to-Gawd sho’-’nuff glad?”

“You is the foolishhest woman — astin’ me is I glad I is ma’ied to you!”

“You ain’t answered until yet.”

“I ain’t nev’ thought a man could be so glad, sweetness. I reckon I is the gladdes’ man what is.”

She sighed. For thirty-two years she had awaited this moment; waited for it with a decreasing supply of optimism. And now it had come. That morning she had been Virgie Goree, spinster; now she was Virgie Posey, bride. More, she felt reasonably certain that she was adored by the shrimpy little man at her side. The future appeared roseate indeed — especially since there was no argument as to the potential ruler of the home that was to be.

Love and marriage had occupied a very small portion of Virgie’s thoughts in the past, largely because of the fact that she had been too busy. She was accounted the best cook in Opelika and for years her culinary services had brought a fancy price; yet always she had dreamed of the day when some doughty knight would ride up to claim her heart and her large and muscular hand. Against that hour she had hoarded her earnings — every penny over and above the bare necessities of life. Two months previously she had let it become generally known that she had a balance of nearly a thousand dollars in the Opelika bank. To her horror she was not immediately besieged by suitors.

No silver lining showed itself until Lazarus Posey drifted into action — timid, retiring, awkward, diffident, afraid of his own shadow, and

hopelessly inexperienced in love. He paid timid court to the massive Virgie and his suit was blessed with success. Much to Virgie's surprise, she found that the runt of a man seemed to care for her even more than he cared for her fortune, and she responded with a passion that fairly terrified him. The epochal evening when they found themselves in each other's arms had been a wonder hour for the pair.

"You ain't nev' kissed another woman, Lazarus?"

"Nary one!"

She nodded. "Don't hahdly reckon you has. You don't ac' ve'y 'spe'ienced."

"No; I ain't nev' kissed no gals. Is you ev' been kissed befo'?"

Virgie hung her head in virtuous shame.

"I is a hones' woman, hon."

His eyes narrowed with jealousy. "You was engage' oncet to Dolphus McQuarter, wa'n't you, befo' he went to Bummin'ham?"

"Uh-huh! But I ain't been on'y a gal then, sweetness, not hahdly eighteen yeahs ol'—an' Dolphus was a pow'ful han'some man."

"Yeh!"—bitterly. "Diff'ent from what I is."

"Now, honey, that ain't noways fair. Me'n Dolphus wa'n't on'y jes' chillun, an' we di'n't know no mo' 'bout'n love an' sichlike than what you does now. But you ast me an'. I ain't never been no woman not to tell the truth."

“Reckon you ain’t hahdly love me much, like you was lovin’ him in them days?”

“How come not?”

“I ain’t nothin’ on’y a li’l shrimp.”

“You is the grandes’ man, Lazarus! I is done plumb fo’got that ol’ Dolphus McQuarter.”

Her voice rang with a nuance of deepest sincerity; but Lazarus was too devoid of ego to be thus easily convinced.

“Where Dolphus is at now?”

“Bummin’ham.”

“What he doin’ there?”

“I dunno. Ain’t hea’d nothin’ on’y tha’s where he is at.”

“Runnin’ roun’ with wimmin like what he useter do when he lived in Opelika, I reckon. Dolphus always did have a winnin’ way with ladies.”

“He ain’t nev’ had no way with me, Lazarus. You is the on’ies’ man I ever really did love—sho’ ’nuff, that is.”

Thereupon they embraced again and were content. But the spectre of the Adonis-like Dolphus McQuarter refused to remain unnoticed. It re-entered the stage two weeks later when the bride-to-be suggested a honeymoon. Lazarus shook his head thriftily.

“I ain’t got no money fo’ no honeymoon.”

“That don’t make no diff’ence, hon.”

“How come not?”

“I is got money.”

“Reckon we is gwine need that fo’ sumthin’ mo’ ’portant than what a honeymoon is.”

Virgie set her teeth and shook her head; and those who knew Virgie understood that when she set her teeth and shook her head events in the immediate future were pretty certain to develop as she willed.

“Lis’en heah at what I is sayin’, Lazarus. I is thutty-two yeahs ol’, come August, an’ I ain’t never had no husban’ ontill yet. Fo’ the pas’ six or seven yeahs they is been uppity niggers in Opelika which is been sayin’ I wa’n’t never gwine git married. An’, now that I is gittin’ me one, they ain’t nobody gwine say all the trimmin’s what a young gal has ain’t comin’ with him. I is got ’mos’ a thousan’ dollars all save’ up — cash money. An’ I is gwine spen’ some of it right — so these Opelika niggers’ll shut up fo’ever an’ mo’. We’ll have a weddin’ they ain’t never gwine fohget, an’ then we is goin’ to Bummin’ham on a reg’lar sho’-’nuff honeymoon. Fo’ one month Virgie Goree is gwine have the bestes’ time a woman ever did have. After that ——” Virgie sighed expressively; it was plain that the dim and distant future held few worries.

But Lazarus had perked up. The pale yellow of his eyes tinted a jealous green. “Whyn’t you pick out C’lumbus or Atlanta or Mobile or N’Yawleens? Why we is got to go to Bummin’ham?”

“Because,” responded the practical Virgie, “I

is been to all them other places an' I ain't never been to Bummin'ham."

"N'r neither I ain't," he persisted doggedly; "but Dolphus McQuarter has!"

She shook her head, vastly pleased with this display of jealousy and not at all averse to encouraging it.

"Huh! I ain't mindin' 'bout Dolphus McQuarter."

"Well, I is! An' I ain't hankerin' to spen' no honeymoon 'long with my wife's ol' fiansay."

"Sho' now, Lazarus, I ain't been lovin' Dolphus fo' the longes' time."

"Mebbe so you ain't; but tha's jes' cause you ain't saw him," he returned sagely. "They ain't no tellin' what'd happen if'n you was to meet him again."

"You ain't got no cause worryin' 'bout Dolphus, hon. An' I is got my min' entirely sot on Bummin'ham."

Her mind remained set on Birmingham; and now every turn of the wheels whirled them nearer the Alabama metropolis, safely wedded and happy beyond the most delicious moments of their wildest dreams.

The conductor appeared at the door of the coach.

"Tickets! Have your tickets ready!"

Virgie smiled. The stage was set and her great moment had at last arrived—the moment for which she had waited with ill-concealed impatience.

She was about to demonstrate in a practical way that her love was of the gloriously unselfish variety.

She opened her new straw suitcase and extracted therefrom a shiny leather wallet. This she handed to her husband. "The tickets is in there, da'lin'," she murmured. "It looks better fo' you to give 'em to the conductor."

Lazarus unfolded the wallet and stretched forth tentative fingers for the long green tickets. Then he paused and his eyes seemed about to pop from his head.

"Virgie," he whispered reverently, "they's a lot of twen'y-dollar bills in heah!"

"They's five hun'ed dollars in that wallet, honey. You is gwine keep it!" She squeezed his hand.

He was left gasping by this display of regal generosity.

"You is givin' it to me?"

"It's our'n. You is gwine keep it, 'cause it don't look good fo' a lady to be payin' out the money w'en she is on her honeymoon."

"Virgie! You is the sweetes' gal!"

"You hones' think so, da'lin'?"

"I ain't think so. I knows it!"

Five hundred dollars! He covertly counted the crisp new yellowbacks. He had never before seen so much money, save on those gala occasions of his retiring smalltown life when he visited the bank.

Five hundred dollars—and he was custodian and part owner thereof! What small doubt of

the fulness of his wife's love he may have retained was banished instanter. He handled the wallet gingerly and extended the tickets to the smiling conductor, receiving in exchange two celluloid checks, which he placed meticulously in his hatband.

"Just married?" queried the railroad official.

"Reckon so." Lazarus grinned proudly.

"On your honeymoon, eh?"

"So't of."

The conductor waved his blue-sleeved arm.

"Have as good a time as you can while it lasts. Honeymoons don't occur often. Good luck to the pair of you!"

He moved slowly down the aisle. Lazarus folded the wallet painstakingly and placed it in an inside pocket.

"Some white folks sho' is gran'—ain't they, Virgie?"

"Uh-huh!" she breathed. "He's a elegant conductor."

Ten minutes later she again turned to her husband.

"This car is awful hot fo' that ov'coat, Lazarus."

"Kinder." He mopped a profusely perspiring forehead.

"Whyn't you take it off? You might ketch col' if'n you keeps it on."

Lazarus met his wife's eyes. They flashed the message: "I am boss!" Off came the overcoat.

He folded it respectfully and placed it beside him on the seat, necessarily moving closer to his large wife as he did so.

For the balance of the journey the bride and groom spooned unblushingly, exhibiting a vast indifference to the beauties of the hilly topography of Northern Alabama. The train was late. Darkness came upon them long before the tall buildings of Birmingham appeared to view. Virgie produced a succulent lunch, carefully wrapped in a copy of the *Dothan Eagle*; and they feasted, regaling themselves at the water cooler between sessions with crisply fried chicken.

At seven o'clock they rounded the base of Red Mountain, and the thousand fires of the coke ovens came into view. Lazarus sat up very straight. "Golly Moses!" he ejaculated. "They is bu'nin' out all they fiel's."

A native of the city, passing down the aisle, paused to laugh raucously and derisively.

"Huh!" he proffered. "Them's coke ovens."

Virgie cowed the derider with a stare of wicked hostility and he moved sheepishly away. "Co'se them is cook ovens," explained Virgie, secretly wondering what monster hotel required so many fires.

"Sho' 'nuff," returned Lazarus passively. "You sho' does know ev'ything, sweetness."

The long train paused in the yards and the honeymooners gazed interestedly down First Avenue.

where the lights in the big buildings glowed like a sprinkling of stars in the clear sky. Lazarus was excessively nervous. Montgomery was the largest city he had ever visited, and he was oppressed by the massiveness of Birmingham — the ring of flaming furnaces and blazing coke ovens; the grim cordon of steel mills and fire-spurting pipe plants.

The brakeman came through and announced Birmingham. The tired passengers whose destination had been reached rose, stretched their cramped limbs and collected luggage. Lazarus reached for his overcoat; but Virgie stopped him.

"'Tain't col' outside. You don't need that heavy ov'coat now."

"But it looks so swell, hon."

"Looks good ain't gwine he'p you any if'n you catch a so' th'oat."

Lazarus laid the coat over his thin arm and tentatively reached for one suitcase. Virgie grabbed the other, and they rose to join the procession that surged slowly toward the forward platform.

The train snorted under the shed of the handsome Terminal Station. It jerked, quivered, and then stopped with a hissing of air brakes. Virgie and her husband followed the crowd to the platform, then descended a stairway to an underground passage that led them eventually to another flight of stairs. This they mounted and entered the high-domed coloured waiting room. The immensity of

the place awed them; the bride was slightly uneasy, the groom frankly so.

“What we is gwine do now?” he asked.

“Go to a hotel,” was her practical solution of the problem.

“Which hotel?”

“Dunno; I ain’t never been to Bummin’ham befo’.”

“N’r neither I ain’t been there.”

“Then you knows jes’ as much ’bout it as I does.”

“Less’n that. Mebbe we’d bes’ take a look roun’.”

They passed through the waiting room and emerged on Twenty-sixth Street. The lights of many restaurants and second-class hotels winked at them from across the street. Before their eyes the sombre quiet of Fifth Avenue was split by a giant Tidewater car, which shot to the surface from the three-blocks-long subway and rattled on in the general direction of Ensley. A Norwood bus, bound for Chestnut Hill, stopped at the opposite corner to discharge and take on passengers.

A Boyles car, inbound, and a Gate City car, outbound, paused briefly before the depot. Half a dozen taxicabs thrummed to the curb and took on fares for the city’s leading hotels. Everybody seemed to be going somewhere, and, what was more to the point, to know just where they were going.

The newly married pilgrims were gripped with vague uncertainty. Virgie shook her head.

"They mus' be some nigger hotel near heah," she vouchsafed.

"Sho' mus'."

"We is got to fin' it."

"Uh-huh!"

"You is got to fin' it," she qualified. "I'll wait in the depo' until you gits back."

"I ain't know where to go," he faltered.

"Co'se not! If'n you did you woul'n't have to look. You c'n fin' some hack driver an' ast him where some respectful nigger hotel is at."

"Ha'n't you better go with me, hon?" he queried nervously.

"Sho' now, Lazarus, that woul'n't be ladylike."

Resignedly he picked up suitcase and overcoat, and she lifted her burden.

They retraced their steps to the brilliantly illuminated waiting room.

"You wait heah," he said. "I ain't gwine be gone on'y a few minutes."

"Fin' a good one, sweetness. An' git the bridal soot." She beamed pridefully upon him.

Lazarus watched his chance and scurried across the broad thoroughfare like a little brown beetle. The evening was warm and he felt grateful that he was unencumbered by the heavy overcoat his bride had presented him with that day after the nuptial feast. Once on the opposite side, he stood uncertainly teetering on the balls of his overlarge elegantly shod feet. Fate solved his problem. An

antiquated seagoing hack rolled insinuatingly to the curb and an ebony driver leaned forth.

“Hack?”

“Don’t wan’ no hack. I wan’s advice.”

The driver promptly alighted and stood close beside the seeker after information.

“Ise a specialist in that line too.”

“What I wan’s to know is this: Where c’n I fin’ a fust-class nigger hotel?”

“I c’n take you to one for fo’ bits.”

“Far from heah?”

“Not s’ve’y.”

“Tell me where ’tis at an’ I’ll give you a quarter.”

“Where’s the two bits?”

Lazarus produced a pair of dimes and a slick nickel, which the hackman carefully examined and pocketed.

“Right roun’ that corner yonder yo’ll see a place marked Hotel — Coloured Only. Tha’s it.”

The lobby of the hotel was far above the Opelika average. Two or three men sat huddled about an asthmatic stove despite the fact that a sudden rise of the mercury bid for open doors and windows. The attenuated clerk bustled behind the counter as the prospect entered and stood awkwardly inside the door.

“Sumthin’ you wants?”

“This a coloured hotel?”

“Bes’ in Bummin’ham.”

"I is heah with my wife. I wan's the ve'y bes' what you is got."

The clerk smiled knowingly. He knew the symptoms.

"Big fine room with bath?"

"Uh-huh! How much?"

"Dollar'n a half a day."

Twelve bits! The price was steep, but ——

"I'll take it."

"Register heah — jes' write yo' name an' wife."

That formality attended to, Lazarus turned to depart, but the efficient clerk stopped him.

"Rules of the house is cash in advance."

"Huh!"—grandly. "Don't make no diff'ence to me w'en I pays. You got change fo' a twen'y-dollar bill?"

"Reckon — yeh, I got it." .

Lazarus felt the admiring eyes of the lobby loungers upon him. With the gesture of a millionaire he flipped back his coat and placed his left hand in the inside pocket. His lips were expanded in a broad triumphant grin.

Slowly the grin faded. A sickly, worried, pea-green expression superseded it. His skinny knees wobbled. The precious wallet had disappeared!

At first Lazarus was too stunned by his loss-fully to comprehend its magnitude. He flapped with limp hands at every pocket. He turned each inside out. He divested himself of his coat and groped frantically at the lining. His frenzied search was



fruitless. Lazarus Posey wrung his hands in an excess of misery.

"Oh! My Gawd!" he moaned. "I is in bad, sho' 'nuff!"

"Sumthin' wrong?" asked the clerk solicitously. Lazarus raised pitiful eyes.

"Not sumthin'," he returned; "jes' ev'ythin'! I is been did outen five hund'ed dollars."

"Five hund'ed! You is on'y talkin' with yo' mouth."

An idea crashed into Lazarus' puny brain. The wallet — the too friendly hack driver who had left his seat to impart advice. Probably the wallet had been about to fall from his pocket and the hackman had noticed. He emitted a wild shrill shriek and darted through the doorway. He made the first hundred yards in nothing at all and clipped three seconds off that in the next hundred. He pulled up panting before the ancient shooting gallery where he had been accosted by the hackman. Hack and man had disappeared.

Lazarus stared through the traffic maze at the mammoth Terminal Station. Then abruptly he seated himself on the curb. Lazarus was exceedingly ill. There wasn't a doubt about it; he had come to the city fresh and verdant and had been taken in with neatness and dispatch.

"Ninny what I is! . . . Oh! Lawdy! What'll Virgie say?"

He meditated sadly over that phase of the mat-

ter for a few minutes. What would Virgie say? Knowing Virgie as he did, he fancied she'd say a plenty, and say it loudly; and she was very likely to be more comprehensive in her anger than mere words. And Virgie was very capable of making things physically unpleasant, once she set her mind to the task.

His soul shrivelled at the prospect. The ultimate had occurred—all in a bunch. Circumstances had altered his case considerably, and then some. Twenty minutes previously he had desired nothing quite so much as the feel of his bride's muscular arms about his elongated neck. Now he had a sickening suspicion that the embrace would be of fingers instead of arms, and that their efforts would be confined largely to the wind-pipe.

What he particularly liked about his bride at the moment was her lack of proximity to his grief-shrunken form. He knew how hard she had worked for the missing five hundred dollars and how scrupulously she had saved. That his error was of omission rather than commission would weigh little with her. She was terrifyingly liable to act first and argue the merits of the case later. And Lazarus was congenitally opposed to physical combat. Too often had he been the combatee.

Spurred by a wan and forlorn hope, he searched through his pockets once again. Barring a secondhand postage stamp, nothing escaped his quiv-

ering, inquiring fingers. Then he rose from the curb and moved away — directly away from the Terminal Station and the waiting bride. He desired distance between them — distance, and plenty of it. He was a firm disciple of arbitration and he had an overpowering hunch that Virgie would not be in an arbitrating mood when she first learned of the loss of her five hundred dollars.

He made his way down Fifth Avenue in the general direction of the centre of town. The street looked long and wide and quiet — and, above all, safe. It offered sanctuary to one who sought quiet and forgetfulness.

Meantime Virgie Goree Posey glued her eyes to the face of the big clock and wriggled uncomfortably on her bench at the station. Being bridally enamoured of her snipelike husband, she experienced a vague uneasiness at his long absence. She knew that Birmingham was very large and Lazarus very small. She knew, further, that he had an acutely minimum supply of that superfine quality which is generally known as gumption, and didn't know much about using what he had.

She envisioned the various disasters that might have befallen him, and eventually girded herself with the two suitcases and the heavy overcoat before sallying forth on Twenty-sixth Street, rather firm in the belief that she would confront a crowd, an ambulance, and the limp form of her husband.

But traffic was as usual. There was no accident,

nor any evidence of one. She paced the sidewalk before the two-blocks-wide station, staring across the crowded thoroughfare for a slinking, shrinking figure. She made her way finally toward Fourth Avenue. Several taxicabs were parked there. At the wheel of each sat a gentleman of colour.

She paused under an arc light. One of the idle chauffeurs, a large, broad-shouldered, yellow-brown man, stared at her long and earnestly. Then he cleared his door in a bound and brought up grinningly before her, hat in hand.

“I’m dag’d if’n ’tain’t Virgie Goree!”

Through the daze of worry over her delinquent spouse, Virgie’s mind flashed to recollection at sound of the resonant voice. She remembered a long dusty street in Opelika, a little unpainted three-room shack, fronted by a garden in which jasmine and azaleas blazed — herself then a slip of a seventeen-year-old, weighty but soft — and a dapper youth of pleasing mien, who vowed — truly — that she was the first and — falsely — that she would be the last. She harkened to the insistent voice:

“Virgie Goree!”

“Dolphus McQuarter!” Her hand clasped his.

“Large as life an’ two times as happy! Dad-blamed if I ain’t plumb pleased to see you. What you is doin’ heah, Virgie?”

Her cloud of trouble again obscured the sun.

“Waitin’,” she responded darkly.

“ Waitin’? ”

“ Fo’ a man.”

“ Name which? ”

“ Lazarus Posey.”

“ Laza — Not Lazarus Posey from Opelika? Not that skinny li’l’ half-borned runt what useter work in the liver’ stable? Not — ”

“ Dolphus McQuarter,” she interrupted, with dignity, “ I’ll have you know that my name at presint is Missis Lazarus Posey! ”

“ Oh! ” Dolphus curbed his speech and remained silent while her meaning filtered through his intellect. “ ’Tis? ”

“ Yeh — ’tis.”

“ I ain’t meant no hahm. Me’n Lazarus always was good frien’s; on’y — well, he is skinny.”

“ Skinny ain’t never done nobody no hurt.”

“ Ma’ied to Lazarus! I swanny! ” Then, not to be outdone: “ You ain’t got so much on me, Virgie — I is engage’.”

“ No? ”

“ Yeh — swell sassiety gal, name of Elnora Phoenix.”

“ Tha’s a pow’ful pretty name, Dolphus.”

“ Pow’ful pretty gal. Got to meet her sometime. How long you is gwine be in Bummin’ham? ”

“ Oh, ’bout two weeks. We is on our honeymoon.”

“ No? ”

“ Yeh.”

"On'y jes' been ma'ied?"

"Uh-huh! This mawnin'."

"I'm dawg'd! . . . Where Lazarus is at?"

"Dunno."

"How come — dunno?"

Virgie explained. As an explainer she was in a class by herself. She commenced with the day Dolphus automatically severed their engagement by departing for Birmingham and his eventual career of free-lance taxicabbing. She wound up with their arrival and Lazarus' search for a bridal suite.

"An' he ain't come back?" queried Dolphus when she paused for breath.

"Not until yet."

"Where'd he go?"

"Out yonder." She waved vaguely toward the city of Birmingham. "What'll I do?"

Dolphus shook his head.

"Nothin'—on'y jes' wait, I reckon."

She docilely followed the advice of her ex-fiancé. By nine o'clock they had resurrected and reinterred the romantic past. By nine-thirty they were frankly bored with each other. When the big dial over the exit pointed to ten o'clock Virgie exploded with a detumescence of righteous wrath.

"He sho'ly ain't los'!" she declared.

"Not hardly. They ain't nobody coul'n't designate him to the Te'minal Station."

Her brows puckered in deep thought.

"Dolphus," she announced, "I is got sumthin' to ast you."

"Yeh?"

"Ain't hahdly no man gwine fall really-truly in love with me, is they?"

The question was a poser and Dolphus diplomatically dodged the issue.

"You useter be pow'ful pretty, Virgie."

"Useter ain't is. What I means is this: If'n I had lots o' money an' a man ma'ied me, ought I should think he was in love with me or the money?"

"If'n 'twas me ——"

"'Tain't you — it's Lazarus."

"You — er — is got money?"

"No," bitterly. "I had money!"

"What you mean — had?"

"I mean I give Lazarus five hund'ed dollars what I had save' up. He had it in his pocket w'en he went out huntin' a hotel fo' I an' him."

Dolphus let loose a long significant whistle.

"Five hund'ed dollars?"

"Uh-huh! Cash money."

"Suff'rin' Solomon! An' he is a'ready been gone two hours an' a ha'f?"

"'Mos'."

Dolphus rose.

"I knows of a nice respectful hotel you c'n put up at t'night — an' t'morrow mawnin' I'll take you to see a lawyer."

"What you mean?"

" You wan's the truth? "

" Yeh."

" I is got a hunch Lazarus Posey is spendin' his honeymoon with yo' money 'stead of with you."

Virgie's large bony fists clenched. Dolphus had put into words her thoughts of the past half hour. She heaped contumely upon her own head for the surge of liberality and trustfulness that had prompted her to give Lazarus the custody of her money. All men were alike, but she had rather flattered herself that Lazarus was different; that his virtue would be fright-insured.

She was stung, and she knew it. And hell hath no fury like a woman stung. With conviction of his guilt, her passionate love for the half man she had wedded became an intense hatred. She fairly reeled under the five-hundred-dollar blow. Anything else she might have forgiven. She longed to meet him, to tell him in graphic English her opinion of him and then give a practical demonstration. All this she told Dolphus — this and a little more.

" An' now," she wound up. " What is I to do? "

" I'll take you to Sally Crouch's hotel an' t'morrow mawnin' you c'n have a warrant swore out against him, case'n he ain't a'ready lef' Bumminham. Is you got any money lef' a-tall? "

" Mos' th'ee hund'ed dollars."

" C'm on!" He glanced questioningly at the luggage. " All that your'n? "

“No!” She fairly spat the word forth. “On’y this, heah straw suitcase. ’Tother one an’ the ov’-coat belong to Lazarus. An’ I ain’t got no min’ totin’ ’em roun’ Bummin’ham. I is got enough remembrances of him without I got to look at what I give him fo’ a weddin’ presint.”

The practical Dolphus picked up suitcase and overcoat. Followed by Virgie, he crossed the waiting room and checked them, paying a dime on each. He handed the checks to Virgie.

“Lazarus cain’t git ’em, anyway,” he commented. “Lot he cares!” she sniffed, dangerously close to tears of rage and smashed pride. “Ain’t he got my five hund’ed dollars?”

“I got my taxi outside,” suggested Dolphus. “I’ll drive you down to Sally Crouch’s an’ lef’ you there. T’morrow mawnin’ I’ll take you to see Lawyer Evans Chew.”

The three-hour vigil had seemed interminable to the deserted bride; but her agony of apprehension was a wild orgy of joy in comparison with the racking Lazarus Posey had undergone. He had tramped the streets of Birmingham like a man possessed — furtive, slinking bullet head shaking from side to side on his skinny neck. A large and juicy blob of grief had descended to deluge him with hopeless misery. He was the walking personification of concentrated gloom.

And the worst of it was, he was sincerely distressed at the sudden and highly unsatisfactory

termination of his wedding journey. He was in love with the massive creature who had won his heart and hand, and his envisionment of her forlorn figure sitting patiently in the coloured waiting room tore at his heartstrings.

Twice he turned lagging steps toward the Terminal Station, which bulked in the gloom at the end of the avenue. Twice a fifty-fifty split of nice discretion and besetting fear turned him back. He wanted to go to Virgie and he wanted to remain away. If only he hadn't lost all of the five hundred! If only he had retained a tithe of the dowry!

Ten o'clock. He started grimly toward the depot, determined to face the thing through at whatever cost. Professor Alec Champagne's string-and-reed orchestra, holding an impromptu concert in a Fifth Avenue drug store, lured him to a not unwilling pause. The longer he could conscientiously avert his personal millennium the happier he felt.

He stood on the curb, listening sadly to the raggy music and staring nervously at the lights of the Terminal Station, three blocks away. Two glaring headlights split the gloom of the avenue. Idly Lazarus raised his eyes to inspect the automobile. It shot under the corner arc.

Lazarus' little body grew rigid. His eyes dilated. His fishy hands clenched with magnificent anger. He recognized the occupants of the car. One was his bride! The other was Dolphus Mc-Quarter, her onetime fiancé!

“Oh, Lawdy!” he moaned as the car dislimned in the smoky night. “I shuah knowed all the time why she puck out Bummin’ham fo’ her honeymoon!”

Lawyer Evans Chew — slender, immaculate, creamy-brown, possessed of a vast dignity and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles — tapped importantly on his desk while he gave ear to the tale of Virgie’s blasted honeymoon.

The sun of midmorning shone brightly through the windows of the private sanctum of the town’s leading legal light. It played across his near-mahogany desk and was reflected with interest by the enormous diamond that reposed magnificently against a background of cerise scarf.

Finally the large woman finished her story. Lawyer Chew cleared his throat portentously.

“What do you wish me to do, Mis’ Posey?”

“Fust off, I want that wuthless li’l’ runt ’rested; an’ then I wants a d’vohee mighty quick.”

“Er — ah — this heah case is a open-an’-shut breach of trus’.”

“Ain’t no britches of trus’ ’bout’n this, Lawyer Chew. He done stold my money.”

“Practically so; we is agreed ’pon that. But the law gives an’ impahts a diff’ent interprumtation to such cases as made an’ pervided by the statutes of this heah sov’ eign State of Alabama. Bein’ as he come into possession of that money of

yo' own free will an' acco'd, his offence is breach of trus', 'stead of larceny. Understan'?"

"No. What I wan's to know is, c'n I have him 'rested?"

Lawyer Chew rose importantly and consulted the Alabama Code before delivering his opinion.

"The dicta an' decision of this heah great state says you can."

Virgie was a person of action.

"Do it!"

The attorney cleared his throat.

"You say he got away with five hund'ed dollars of your'n?"

"Ev'y red cent! An' if'n that ain't stealin'——"

"Leavin' you without nothin'?" he probed.

"Not hahdly! I is got 'bout th'ee hund'ed dollars lef'."

The counsellor smiled blandly. No need to collect an insignificant fee in advance when by bidding his time he could levy a worth-while assessment against the three hundred. "My fee will be reasonable."

"W'en you gits him in jail an' d'livers me a fust-class d'vohee I ain't keer what yo' fee is."

"Good enough! You say Dolphus McQuarter directed you to me?"

"He sent me to you — yassuh."

"Very well." He pressed a button on his desk and a stenographer entered. "I will draw the

papers in the case, Mis' Posey. If yo'll kindly wait in the anteroom ——"

Three-quarters of an hour later Mrs. Virgie Goree Posey departed from the office building and returned to her comfortable room in Sally Crouch's Cozy Home Hotel for Coloured, bearing in mind an appointment with the attorney for nine o'clock, Monday morning.

"T'morrow is Sunday," he explained, "an' they ain't nothin' I c'n do then, 'ceptin' on'y to locate yo' husban'. If'n they is any developmen's I'll git prompt in touch with you th'ough Miss Crouch."

The day had started off auspiciously for the lawyer. He had more than a suspicion that the defaulting bridegroom was still in Birmingham, and he intended to bring matters to the crisis point and then collect a sizable fee from his client. He believed in showing his goods before pricing them. He leaned back in his swivel chair and lighted a fragrant Turkish cigarette.

Five minutes later there came a rap on the door and his stenographer entered.

"Gen'lman to see you, Lawyer Chew."

"Client?"

"Looks that way."

"Ushah him in."

The lawyer grabbed for a dusty volume — Jones on Evidence was nearest — and was absorbed in its pages when the visitor entered.

He was a little man, with large rolling eyes, a diffident manner, a sparrow frame and enormous feet. He stood just inside the doorframe, twirling a grey felt hat with trembly fingers.

"Is you the lawyer?" he faltered.

Chew paid him no heed. He mumbled studiously:

"The exceptions to the heahsay-evidence rule ——"

"Is you Lawyer Evans Chew?" repeated the newcomer a bit more loudly.

Chew looked up suddenly.

"Oh!" He rose. "Yes; I is Lawyer Chew. Have a seat. What c'n I do fo' you?"

The little man crawfished across the room.

"Feller at the boa'din' house sent me to you — said you was the bes' nigger lawyer in town."

"He was imminently correct — puffec'ly so. An' what might yo' business be?"

"I ain't hahdly know," faltered the other. "My name is Posey — Lazarus Posey."

Jones on Evidence dropped from the suddenly nerveless fingers of Lawyer Evans Chew. His eyes narrowed.

"Repeat that over again, please."

"Lazarus Posey. I comes from Opelika."

"Oh!" Chew seated himself hastily. Things were decidedly coming his way. "Have a cigar, Mistuh Posey. Have two of 'em — put t'other in yo' pocket."

The heavy Havana smoke restored a semblance of mental equilibrium to Lazarus. And thereupon he detailed to the lawyer the story of his matrimonial troubles up to the time he left the Terminal Station in search of a bridal suite.

"An' then?" prompted Chew.

The truth trembled on the tip of Lazarus' tongue. Inspiration gave him pause. His worldly assets at the moment, consisted of fourteen dollars. Obviously if the lawyer knew he was fortuneless he would be forced to take his case elsewhere. And he had a vague and popular idea that costs included the attorney's fees. He determined to pass the buck to Virgie; to trick Chew into taking the case and putting it through to a successful conclusion, at which time Virgie could reimburse him for his professional trouble. Thereupon he revised the facts to suit himself.

"I got los'," he lied cheerfully, "an' di'n't on'y fin' my way back at hal'f pas' ten o'clock; which is why I come to see you on account of what I seen then."

"Meanin' which?"

Tirelessly Lazarus harked back to the girlhood of his thoroughly adult wife and her nipped-in-the-bud romance with Dolphus McQuarter, with its sequel of her joy ride with that gentleman the previous night.

"'Tain't that Ise jealous," he wound up; "but it's a sort of mean trick fo' a man's bride to spen'

her honeymoon with another man. Ain't it, now?"

The lawyer readily agreed that it was.

"An' what you want is ——"

"D'voice — right away."

"D'voices takes time — an' money."

"Never you min' 'bout'n the money paht of it," proclaimed Lazarus grandly. "That don't make no diff'ence with a man like what I is. How soon c'n I git a d'voice from that woman?"

Chew shook his head.

"Time, as I remahked a few minutes sence, Brother Posey, is of the essence of all matters legal, an' it will be a wital element in this case now befo' me an' under due an' careful c'nsideration. Of co'se the first thing to do is to draw up a petition."

Thirty minutes later Chew lay back in his chair, the necessary data volumiously dictated to his stenographer.

"Anythin' else I c'n do fo' you at the presint moment, Brother Posey?"

"Ye-e-e-s."

"Which?"

"Does you know Dolphus McQuarter?"

"Yes."

"What does he do an' what soht of man is he?"

Chew talked slowly, never for a second dropping his mantle of pomposity.

"Brother McQuarter has always been regahded an' looked upon heahabouts as an expremely re-

spectable member of Bummin'ham's coloured community. He is Pas' Gran' Worshipful Inner Warden of the Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise an' a ardent member of the Primitive Baptist Chu'ch. Fu'thermo', he moves in our bes' social circles, with the eklat of one to the habit bohn, as the saying is; in fac', he is at the presint moment engage' to one of the season's most radiantest debutaunts. He is ——"

Lazarus extended a restraining hand.

"Wait a minute, Lawyer Chew — wait jes' a li'l' minute. What that you say 'bout'n his bein' engage'?"

"Yes, he is engage' to be ma'ied — publicly engage'."

"Dawg-gawn his hide! An' him spendin' my wife's honeymoon with her. That makes it even worse'n I thought. Who is he engage' to?"

"Miss Elnora Phœnix, a young lady of mos' estimable wo'th an' of a fine ol' fambly."

"Where this Elnora Phœnix gal live at?"

Chew gave the address.

"'Tain't on'y 'bout th'ee blocks from heah. Why?"

"Nothin'," retorted Lazarus, with a sudden accession of discretion. "Ise jes' on'y cu'ious."

He bade the attorney good day and promised to return to the office on Monday at noon. And after he had gone Lawyer Chew gave vent to a deep satisfied sigh.

“Tha’s what comes,” he mused, “of bein’ knowed as the bes’ coloured lawyer what is.”

Things were emphatically drifting Chewward, and the horn-rim-spectacled attorney was not one to fail to grab Opportunity’s forelock, once it was within reach.

The situation was as clear as crystal to him: Lazarus lost in the great Southern city; the bride waiting impatiently; Lazarus’ glimpse of the innocent Virgie and Dolphus as they rode down Fifth Avenue in the car that afforded Dolphus an excellent and easy livelihood; the bride’s belief that the groom had eloped with her money; and the man’s conviction that she had eloped with her own ex-fiancé.

Already Chew’s plans for a transcendent campaign of reconciliation were crystallizing. He cast himself in the rôle of good Samaritan, not forgetting that the 1919 model of that famed gentleman demanded reward in cash.

Virgie and Lazarus, he judged, were really in love with each other; and he postulated they would pay more for knowledge that they had wrongly convicted each other on circumstantial evidence — with a sequel of belated and doubly saccharine connubial bliss — than for a mere bitter-sweet divorce.

And so he planned to put each in the frame of mind for forgiveness; to tell each most of the rosy truth; and to collect — while the collecting iron

was sizzling white with heat — a sizable fee from the parties of the first and second parts.

It was truly an ideal arrangement; one that would bring unalloyed happiness to bride and groom and a large portion of gratitude and cash to the attorney. He felt ethically secure; for what more, he reasoned, can be asked of a lawyer than that he rescue bliss from a labyrinth of unhappiness and misunderstanding? He gazed blandly upon results rather than upon the methods of attaining them; and the sensation was one of infinite soul satisfaction accompanied by a symphony of clinking, well-earned dollars. Large slices of Virgie's three hundred and Lazarus' five hundred, fancied Chew, were destined to bloat his considerable bank account.

"She give him the money in trus'," he mused legally; "an', that bein' the case, I reckon I is the *cestui que trus'*, sho' 'nuff!"

From Chew's office Lazarus Posey made his way to the cottage occupied by the socially eminent Phoenix family. He inquired timidly for Miss Elnora and was informed that she was spending the afternoon and night with a friend in Bessemer.

"She'll be back at noon t'morrow. Any message?"

There was no message, save that Mr. Posey would be on deck promptly at noon. And he was. But Elnora wasn't. She did not show up until after one o'clock. At sight of her Lazarus gasped.

“My Gawd!” communed he. “Think of a man bein’ engage’ to a gal like that an’ elopin’ with a woman what looks like Virgie!”

There was basis aplenty for comparison between the women — comparison in which Virgie came off sadly second best. Everything that Virgie wasn’t this girl was, and vice versa, plus. Elnora Phœnix was small and rounded and soft-eyed and quiet-voiced, and neatly though loudly dressed; urban from the top of her marcelled hair to the toes of her polished high laced boots. And Elnora was fascinatingly young.

“Mistuh Posey?”

It was plain from Elnora’s manner that she did not recall the gentleman and accounted herself fortunate in the lapse of memory. Lazarus bobbed his head eagerly.

“Yassum. Tha’s I’m. This Miss Phœnix?”

“Uh-huh! What c’n I do fo’ you?”

“I wan’s to make talk with you a minute.”

Elnora hesitated with maidenly propriety.

“Is I ever been formerly iterduce’ to you?”

“No-o,” answered the honest Opelikan; “but — er — ah — I reckon we is soht of related.”

“Related?” Elnora’s eyebrows arched.

“On’y soht of, that is.”

“How come?”

“Well, you see, it’s thisaway: Yo’ fiansey is takin’ a honeymoon with my wife!”

“Eh?” Miss Phœnix seated herself abruptly.

“Tha’s jes’ it, Miss Phoenix — jes’ like what I says. Yo’ fianstay done run off with my bride, which useter be his fianstay.”

Elnora went through the facial contortions of a fish recently separated from its natural element.

“Splain yo’ meanin’, Mistuh Posey — an’ splain it tho’ough!”

Mr. Posey splained tho’ough, refraining mercifully from a too honest description of his wife’s lack of pulchritude. By the time he finished Elnora had run the emotional gamut of betrayed love. She had heated from shocked surprise to horror, and from horror to hurt pride; then chilled to merciless fury — cold, calculating, vengeful.

“You is plumb sho’ they ain’t no mistake?” she queried.

“Reckon if’n a man wa’n’t sho’ he woul’n’t go makin’ no such scusations like what I is. Ain’t it the truth?”

Elnora rose abruptly.

“What you gwine do?” asked Lazarus.

“Fin’ Dolphus an’ cumfront him with proof of his infumy.”

Five minutes later she rejoined the brideless bridegroom.

“What you is doin’ this afternoon, Mistuh Posey?”

“Nothin’. Why?”

“I jes’ been an’ phoned the taxicab company Dolphus works with, an’ they says he took his car

an' went to Blue Lake Park with a lady. Ise goin' out there an' fin' him. Is you comin'?"

Lazarus experienced a heavy apprehensive chill at thought of the course conventionally pursued by outraged husbands. He did not adjudge himself adequate to the rôle. There was entirely too much of Dolphus from the standpoint of brawn. And yet he wished to meet Virgie; to meet her while he was bulwarked by the injustice of his own position as a set-off against the loss of her five hundred dollars. She had lost considerable cash and he had lost considerable wife. He was magnanimously prepared to call it square.

Besides, he fancied that — in the company of the white-hot Elnora — Dolphus would prove meek and mild, so that he — Lazarus — could assume the attitude of one whose wrongs had reached the colossal proportions which demand icy dignity rather than red gore.

He went. They walked to the corner of Second Avenue and Nineteenth Street, where they boarded a trolley for Blue Lake Park, the coloured amusement resort, which was the Sunday Mecca of all of African descent who resided in Birmingham.

Blue Lake Park was closing a signally successful season in a blaze of glory. The crowd was unusually dense, even for Sunday, and the snap of early fall in the air lent zest to the earnestness with which the press of coloured humanity sought to divert itself.

Society was out en masse, mingling democratically with the coloured proletariat; labourers rubbing elbows with aristocratic butlers, elevator boys with chauffeurs, shoe-shine men with janitors. High and low mixed in a glorious casteless revelry.

The concessions were doing a land-office business. The battered two-car trains of the rickety roller coaster dipped and rose and skidded, while eager crowds surged about the ticket window, dripping dimes. The blatant carrousel shrieked its siren song into the air. Popcorn and soft-drink venders disposed of their wares as fast as they could change money. The Midway was blocked with a grinning, pushing crowd.

And in the crowd, arm in arm, were Dolphus McQuarter and Virgie Posey. They, alone of the throng, were unsmiling; on the face of each was an expression of grim determination. They were there with a purpose, and the purpose was small and skinny and richly brown. It bore the name of Lazarus Posey, and Opelika was the town of its nativity.

Dolphus had figured it all out by a process of inductive reasoning that left him with a headache. He had a besetting hunch that Lazarus had not departed from Birmingham, and he knew that by this time he must have made the acquaintance of at least one friend congenial with his five hundred dollars. And two happy carefree negroes, Sunday

and five hundred dollars could mean only one thing — Blue Lake Park.

And so Dolphus and Virgie fought through the crowd in search of Lazarus at the very moment when Lazarus and Elnora Phoenix alighted from the street car and entered the park, searching for the searchers.

For two hours they managed to miss connection. Virgie grew tired and Dolphus vastly bored. The fugiting of tempus served only to awaken within him a keen and uncomfortable consciousness of Virgie's hopelessly provincial homeliness. He felt that he was injuring his social prestige by the earnestness of his cavalier efforts. And the search was deadly dull, unpunctuated as it was by diversion on any of the amusement devices.

He had suggested the trip because he was a gentleman of sporting instincts. He relished a good scrap whether or not there was great physical discrepancy between the combatants, and he fancied that considerable fur would fly should Virgie meet her supposedly larcenous husband.

But the chase palled. The lack of action was depressing to one of Dolphus' virile nature. He suggested that they should return to the city, and Virgie, footsore and weary, nodded affirmatively.

They retraced their steps up the Midway. They heard a wild scream from a car in process of plumb-ing the prize dip on the roller coaster. The crowd

surged about them and they stopped. To their ears came the hoarse voice of the starter:

“Stan’ back there, coloured folks! On’y fo’ in each car heah. A’right, you li’l’ feller — you’n yo’ gal git in.”

Virgie raised her eyes languidly. Then her figure stiffened; she grabbed Dolphus’ arm in a grip of steel and fairly hurled him through the crowd.

“Yonder they is! Yonder! Ketch ’em!”

Dolphus didn’t know what it was all about, but he was a bull for strength and he put his head down and ploughed through, with Virgie shrilling in his wake. He bought two tickets and came out on the platform in time to see —

He saw a two-car train slowly mounting the long grade that preceded the initial dip. And in the rear seat were Lazarus Posey and Elnora Phoenix.

Dolphus’ jaw dropped. Then it clicked shut. Of a sudden his personal interest in the pursuit had been revived. Cornering Lazarus was one thing; discovering the whys and wherefores of this joy expedition with his very own fiancé was something else yet again.

A pair of empties rolled up, and the dazed fiancé of Elnora and the wrathful bride of Lazarus piled into the front seat just as a tremolo scream in Lazarus’ thin voice announced his unmistakable lack of enthusiasm for the thrills of the roller coaster. The pursuers never paused to consider

that their own car could never catch that in which the offending couple rode; they only knew they had discovered considerable more than they had bargained for, and that immediate action had become a shibboleth.

As the car dragged slowly up the long hill on its cable Dolphus explained briefly and angrily the new and startling development of affairs. For a few seconds Virgie gave ear to his words; but as the car reached the crest of the rise, and she gazed into the depths of the pit into which they were about to descend, she forgot Dolphus, she forgot Lazarus — she forgot everything save the fact that she was about to be suddenly and informally introduced to her Maker. She emitted a bloodcurdling yowl and threw strong arms about the neck of Dolphus McQuarter.

The ensuing five minutes marked an unforgettable period in the life of Virgie Posey. The ground dropped from under her, then caught and threw her high in the air again. She shot across breath-taking chasms and mounted to the heavens. She sired in an agony of terror and nearly choked the struggling Dolphus. And when finally the little cars rolled under the shed that housed the disembarking platform the limp figure of Virgie was dragged out and stretched on the boards.

Fifteen minutes later she rose, bleary-eyed and with the ebony of her complexion underlaid by a greenish hue. She was oblivious to the grins

of the multitude. Terror incarnate had confronted her and left an ineradicable mark. But the hoarse voice of the intolerant Dolphus beat insistently through the babel that surrounded her and brought her back to the realities of the moment.

“Now you done done it, sho’ ’nuff!”

“I — I done which?”

“Los’ ’em!”

“Los’! Who I los’, Dolphus?”

“Yo’ husban’ an’ my gal.”

“O-o-oh! Lawsy! Ain’t it the truth?”

And there was no gainsaying the fact that they were lost. Dolphus and Virgie, the latter shaking at the knees and still acutely conscious of an embarrassing feeling in the region of the solar plexus, circulated industriously through the throng, but without result. It was dark when they departed, tired and miserable.

As for Lazarus and Elnora, they had left the park blithely innocent of the fact that they had been compromised immediately following their single excursion on the roller coaster. That trip had been inspired by the one spark of adventure extant in the puny chest of Lazarus. Its termination found the spark effectually and permanently extinguished.

The sombre mantle of night had descended over Birmingham when Dolphus parked his car before Sally Crouch’s Cozy Home Hotel for Coloured and

assisted the still shaky Virgie up the stairs. He repaired to the headquarters of the garage company and reported to Acey Upshaw, the executive on duty. Acey immediately dispatched Dolphus on a call. When he returned there was a joy-seeking couple waiting to be ridden in Dolphus' big seven-passenger chariot.

Dolphus kept them waiting for a few minutes while he rushed to the telephone and called Elnora's number—"Main 1732, please!" He was frigidly informed by an outraged father that Elnora had gone to church with a gen'leman frien'. Was the gentleman, by any chance, named Posey? Yassuh, the gen'leman was! Dolphus groaned and took small interest in the hectic journey of his fares. When he returned to the city the midnight hour had struck.

Ensued a night of horror for the quartet. Virgie, hopelessly a victim to insomina—thanks to the roller coaster—found Ossa piled on Pelion in the fact that her bridegroom had undertaken to entertain a younger and fairer damsel with the money he had taken from her. Lazarus mourned the loss of his bride's five hundred dollars and bemoaned the readiness with which she had returned to the love of bygone days. Elnora philosophized bitterly upon the perfidy of men in general and of her adored Dolphus in particular. And Dolphus paced the narrow confines of his room and swore mighty oaths which had to do specifically with the prompt

and complete extermination of one Lazarus Posey.

Eventually they dozed away in nightmarish, fitful slumber, while, over on the South Side, Lawyer Evans Chew dreamed noble dreams of the fees becoming immediately due and payable from the estranged couple.

Lazarus rose late and dressed slowly. The future looked impenetrably dark and hopelessly gloomy. Return to Opelika he could not, for sooner or later Virgie would follow suit, and he fancied that little municipality boasted far too few square miles to contain the pair of them. But he didn't want to remain in Birmingham and he knew nowhere else to go. If only he hadn't lost that money!

Thus far he had made for himself two friends — Lawyer Evans Chew and Elnora Phoenix. Elnora he didn't particularly care about. She was nothing but the fiancé of his bride's gentleman friend. She had a crow to pick; hence her interest. Chew now — Lazarus glanced at his watch. It indicated twenty-five minutes before nine o'clock.

Lazarus' appointment with the attorney was for high noon, but he was lonely and in need of counsel. He dragged hopeless feet to a malodorous restaurant, where he inhaled two venerable eggs and a cup of coffee. Then, principally because he had nothing else to do, he walked toward the Penny Prudential Bank Building, which housed Evans Chew's suite of offices.

He strolled sadly into the lobby. Then he ducked — ducked swiftly and efficiently; for, standing at the elevator, he glimpsed Virgie and Dolphus, and he had no hankering after a meeting with them unre-enforced by Elnora. He had implicit confidence in the girl so far as curbing any manifestation of belligerence on the part of Dolphus was concerned. She had virtually promised him immunity. To his ears came the harsh voice of his bride:

“Is you the janitor?” A profusely overalled individual replied that he was. Virgie fired another question: “Does you know is Lawyer Evans Chew in yet?”

Lazarus eased off down the street. He turned the corner in high and three minutes later brought up panting at the Phœnix front door.

“Miss Phœnix! Miss Phœnix!”

Miss Phœnix came, resplendent in a bungalow apron. In two minutes she was in possession of the facts; three minutes more and she was dressed for the street and dragging Lazarus in a bee line toward the Penny Prudential. He remonstrated mildly.

“That they Dolphus — ain’t he li’ble to staht sumthin’?”

“Humph!” Elnora’s pearly teeth clicked. “If’n he does I reckon I’ll finish it.”

Lazarus proceeded with much of the reluctance a bird exhibits in introducing itself to the gaping

jaws of a snake. He was terrified both of Dolphus and of Virgie, but the prospect of a show-down drew him inevitably toward the office of the negro lawyer.

Outside the door of Chew's suite he paused and would have fled, but Elnora turned the knob and stepped within. The stenographer was not there. More, the door separating the outer and inner sanctums was open. Lazarus caught a glimpse of his bride and his convoy's fiancé.

Evans Chew was the first to see the visitors. He rose, with a display of greater haste than dignity, and made a wild dash for the door. But Virgie beat him to it. She had recognized her husband!

A wild yell of triumph pealed from her throat. She was through the doorway in two strides and only the strong arm of the lawyer saved Lazarus from instant annihilation.

"Jes' a minute, Mis' Posey; jes' one li'l' minute — please! Does you want to lan' up in jail?"

The word jail acted like magic. Instinctively Virgie gave pause to her major offensive and Lazarus' life was saved. Meantime the virtuously indignant Elnora took the centre of the stage. With the regal air of a tragedy queen she sailed across the room and poked her engagement ring forcibly into Dolphus' midriff.

"You low-down, wuthless, prospectin' nigger!"

Dolphus grunted. The ring clinked to the floor. Up to that moment Dolphus had fancied that the

only grievance in which he was personally interested was his own against Elnora. And now she was flaring at him with a tirade under which he withered like a dead tree in a forest fire.

"B-b-but," he stammered eventually, "I ain't on'y jes'——"

The wits of Lawyer Evans Chew had been made nimble by much court work, and the diversion afforded by Elnora and Dolphus had given him time for some quick intensive thought.

Things were at sixes and sevens. According to his engagement book Virgie should have departed long before the hour of Lazarus' arrival. This was the gala morning he was to have collected two sizable fees and arranged for the staging of a reconciliation in the afternoon. He was considerably perturbed at the idea that either Virgie or Lazarus would suspect he had been playing both ends against the middle in the hope of double fees.

So he made the best of a mighty bad bargain. He rubbed the palms of his hands together unctuously and insinuated himself between the glaring wife and cowering husband, fully costumed in the rôle of peacemaker.

"I jes' declare!" he intoned. "If'n this heah ain't the mos' fortunate thing ——"

"Which?" snarled Virgie, repossessed of her voice.

"That the bride an' groom should meet thus

romantically in my ve'y own office. Mere quincidence!"

The petrified Lazarus proceeded promptly to spill all of the beans.

"I 'membered our 'gagement was fo' twelve o'clock; but I was thinkin' that if'n I come a li'l' early ——"

"Tha's all right, all right," interrupted Chew hastily; but not so hastily that Virgie, her heart considerably softer now that she was in the vicinity of her dearly beloved though erring spouse, failed to see that all was not as it should be. She swung on Chew:

"You knows Lazarus?"

"Why — er — that is ——"

"Lazarus Posey, is you been heah in this office befo'?"

Lazarus bobbed his head in energetic affirmation.

"Uh-huh! I sho' Lawd is."

"When?"— incisively.

Lawyer Chew interrupted:

"S'posin' you let me straighten this out, Mis' Posey."

"You keep yo' han's outen this, Lawyer Chew! Seems like you is had 'em in too deep a'ready. W'en was you up heah, Lazarus?"

Lazarus was elated over the fact that by some miracle the anger of his magnificently militant wife had shifted to the head of the lawyer. He didn't understand it, but welcomed the diversion.

"Sat'dy," he replied.

"Sat'dy, huh?" Again Virgie transfixed Chew.

"Befo' or after I been heah?"

"Er — after," groaned Chew.

"Lazarus, did he tell you he had done saw me a'ready?"

"He ain't mention yo' name," returned Lazarus stoutly. The direction of the good wind was becoming plainer to him.

Virgie got into action. She seized the attorney by both shoulders and shook him violently.

"They's sumthin' wrong," she declared; "an' you knows all 'bout it. Whyn't you tell Lazarus I been in heah to see you Sat'dy?"

"Ethics," defended Chew weakly. "On'y jes' cause ——"

"'Cause which?"

"I knew it was all a misundumstandin'," quavered Chew, "an' I was prospectin' to effect a recumciliation this mawnin'."

Virgie seized avidly upon a single word.

"Misundumstandin'?"

"Yeh."

"How come?"

"I — er —— Y' see, Mis' Posey, if'n I'd of tol' you right offen the bat you would of been so mad you woul'n't of lis'ened. It's thisaway: Brother Posey di'n't run off with yo' five hund'ed dollars a-tall."

Lazarus quaked. He had almost forgotten the

sinister rôle of the five hundred. And now —

“What you mean?” persisted Virgie.

“He’s got it until yet,” explained Chew. “Ain’t you, Brother Posey?”

“Yes; sho’ is!” lied the bewildered Lazarus.

“Y’ see!” proclaimed the lawyer triumphantly. “An’ I was on’y jes’ fixin’ to make yo’-all happy again.”

The faint spark of manhood in Lazarus Posey flamed into a brief despairing life.

“You is a fine fixer! How ’bout’n Virgie goin’ off an’ spendin’ her honeymoon with Dolphus Mc-Quarter?”

Chew opened his lips in explanation, but Virgie beat him to it. By the time she finished the whole tangle had been unravelled and the loose ends knitted securely. Virgie was flooded with tears of self-pity and misunderstood virtue, and Dolphus and Elnora had glided into each other’s arms.

“All a misundumstandin’,” repeated Chew inanely. “Jes’ on’y that.”

He stood in the centre of the floor. Dolphus had rescued the engagement ring and replaced it on the finger of his adored one. Virgie had collapsed in a chair and was weeping loudly and copiously. Lazarus teetered uncertainly on his immense feet until he intercepted a suggestive nod from Chew. Thereupon he timidly crossed the room and tentatively caressed the shoulder of his lachrymose bride — much after the manner of a

six-year-old patting the trunk of his first elephant.

The result was startling! With a howl of delirious joy Virgie rose and smothered Lazarus in a crushingly ardent embrace.

And finally, when thorough happiness had been restored and Dolphus and Elnora had departed in blissful understanding, Lawyer Chew mentioned the business end of things.

“My fee?” he suggested mildly.

“My husban’ atten’s to them things.” Virgie waved a limp and happy hand.

Lazarus slipped a hand into one of his pants pockets. The depressing jingle of two dollars and eighty-three cents — all his remaining capital — greeted the probe.

The moment was obviously ripe for a full and free confession; but it is a racial characteristic to postpone to the ultimate moment mention of anything likely to prove embarrassing or troublesome.

Of course Lazarus understood that Virgie would have to know the truth, and know it soon; but he was too thrilled with the rapture of the moment and too recent a survivor of domestic typhoon to risk it again. So he borrowed a leaf from Virgie’s book and — secure in the power of her physical alliance — turned on the lawyer.

“I ain’t see where you is got no money comin’ to you,” he announced with quavery boldness.

“Y’all ’greed ——”

“You wa’n’t playin’ fair with us’n. You was

knowin' all the time 'twa'n't nothin' on'y a misundumstandin'."

"But you owes me ——"

"Don't owe you nothin'; an' we ain't gwine pay it."

Lawyer Chew knew when he was beaten. And this was a situation from which he preferred to retire voluntarily. He waved his hand grandiloquently.

"Lawyer Chew ain't no dunner!" he announced ponderously. "W'en his clients ain't got the willin'ness to pay him a fee which he has earned he'd ruther lose the few paltry dollars than raise a row 'bout'n it. Co'se this is an unparalleled 'zample of ingratitude; but ——"

Virgie and Lazarus left the Penny Prudential without paying Lawyer Evans Chew. And Virgie beamed pridefully upon her husband. She had discovered in this spindle-shanked man of hers a new strength — a power of will hitherto unsuspected.

He had bearded a legal lion in his den.

"You sho' is a clever man, Lazarus — honey!"

Lazarus puffed importantly.

"Reckon I is, sweetness. He was tryin' to do us both dirt." Lazarus didn't bother to explain that iron had been injected into his blood by grim necessity. "What we is gwine do now, Virgie?"

She dropped her eyes with maidenly shyness.

"Reckon we might's well git that bridal soot, da'lin'. Fust off, we'll git yo' suitcase an' ov'coat,

which is in the check room at the depo'; an' then we'll fin the hotel an' git a swell room."

"Uh!" The five hundred raised its spectral head. But there was nothing to be done, so Lazarus shrugged resignedly and let grim Fate take her course. Virgie was speaking:

"Fust off — to the Te'minal Station; an' then to the new hotel what I knows about. An' we'll staht all over."

During their walk to the Terminal Station Lazarus was silent, his only contributions to the conversation being in the form of monosyllabic answers to her constant flow of questions. He scarcely heard her rapid fire of self-denunciation for her misunderstanding of the bridegroom, or her manifold promises having to do with the future tranquillity of the Posey household. And even if he had heard he would have been skeptical.

He was keenly conscious of the fact that the worst was yet to come and that it was coming soon and hard. He had little relish for the task immediately before him — that of telling Virgie her five hundred hard-earned dollars had gone beyond hope of redemption.

The worst of it was, she had not the faintest suspicion of the facts. He had admitted in Lawyer Chew's office that the money was still in his possession. If it only was! If —

And then an idea came to Lazarus Posey — a

real honest-to-goodness idea that savoured of inspiration. He chuckled softly. Virgie thought he had the money in his possession, did she? Very well, he had — theoretically.

He would get his overcoat and suitcase from the Terminal Station, go to the hotel and repeat his performance of three nights previous — engage the bridal suite, reach grandly for the pocketbook when the cash-in-advance hint was dropped, and then — and not until then — discover that the money was gone!

Excellent idea! Flawless! Virgie believed the wallet was still in his pocket. He had rehearsed the scene and felt that he was adequate to the rôle. And, once he could convince her that the loss was truly accidental and not solely the result of crass carelessness, the readjustment would certainly prove less sanguinary.

They secured the suitcase and overcoat from the check room, and at Virgie's suggestion he donned the heavy midwinter garment, completely losing himself in its luxurious folds. They boarded a Terminal Station car and went to Sally Crouch's hotel, where Virgie checked out, taking her own suitcase.

"Where we is gwine to now?" queried the bridegroom.

"The bestes' nigger hotel what they is in Bummin'ham," retorted Virgie — "ain't on'y jes' been built th'ee months. It's called the Happy Hotel,

an' the name soht of appealed to me fo' a honey-moon couple."

Lazarus nodded dumbly. He didn't care particularly what the hotel was named and he fancied that the happy part of it was destined to prove a sad misnomer. He murmured ardent words of undying affection into the ears of his consort, working with might and main to put her in a forgiving mood.

He succeeded excellently — so long as there was nothing to forgive. But the five-hundred-dollar bomb had not yet exploded.

The blushing bride led the way into the hotel lobby by three lengths. It was an ornate affair, with walls and ceilings of pressed steel, painted pink. Lazarus, wellnigh invisible in his enormous overcoat, slouched along in her wake. The smiling clerk whirled the register and ingratiatingly extended a pen.

"Want a room?" he queried.

Lazarus tried to make his grin natural.

"Sho' does — bridal soot."

"Ho! Jes' been ma'ied, huh?"

"Tha's it — jes' been ma'ied."

"The bridal soot," announced the clerk, "is the elegantes' of any coloured hotel in the South — bedroom an' pa'lor an' bath. Price is two dollars an' a ha'f a day."

Lazarus didn't hesitate a split second. He didn't care if it was ten dollars a day.

"We'll take it."

He dared not glance toward his bride. He registered with painstaking deliberation. The clerk leaned forward.

"Cash in advance," he announced.

"Huh! Don't make no diff'ence to a man like what I is 'bout'n cash in advance. Ise a payin' man, I is."

The crisis had come to the agonized bridegroom. The muscles of his skinny frame grew taut and he prepared to get away to a flying start when hostilities commenced.

He threw back his overcoat and reached with well-simulated indifference for the inside pocket.

He prepared to summon to his face an expression of horrified surprise. His hand, unused to the overcoat, probed into the pocket of that garment instead of the sack coat he wore beneath it.

And then the face of Lazarus Posey underwent a change marvellous to behold! His knees trembled violently and the ready-made expression that had been awaiting its cue degenerated into an eye-popping jawdropping stare of sickly astonishment — for his fingers closed firmly over a fat wallet!

And not until he drew it forth and substantiated by visual inspection the evidence of his sense of feel did he understand — understand that the money had been in the pocket of his overcoat from the outset, and the overcoat safe in the check room at the Terminal Station.



The beat of his heart accelerated as he adjusted himself to the stunning windfall of luck. With the air of a millionaire he flipped the wallet open and extracted therefrom a twenty-dollar bill.

"Is you got change fo' that?"

Five minutes later the bride and groom faced each other in the sanctity of the bridal suite. Virgie smothered her husband in an avalanche of contrite kisses.

"An', on'y to think, honey, I done had the idee you either took that money from offen me or else that you went an' los' it!"

Lazarus bestowed upon her a reproving glance.

"Sho' now, Virgie," he replied pompously, "seems like you'd ought to know yo' own husban' better'n that!"

THE FIGHT THAT FAILED

CUPID BALDON stepped back from the mirror and surveyed his reflection complacently. He gave a final reassuring pat to the cerise scarf, adjusted his near panama to the precise angle of ultra fashion, dusted his cane with an exhandkerchief, and departed.

As he strutted through the front doorway of the four-room house the two little negro boys on the veranda ceased boisterous play and stared reverently.

“Tha’s him!”

“No!”

“Yeh — shuah ’nuff!”

“Not Cupid Baldon, the prize fighter?”

“Uh-huh! Tha’s the ve’y man what he is.”

Cupid was smiling contentedly when he reached the gate and turned down the tree-lined thoroughfare. That prize-fighter idea had been inspirational. It had given to him — a stranger — a distinction he had never before enjoyed. Cupid’s sojourn in town had been a cumulation of social triumphs, justifying a rank extravagance in the matter of wardrobe. For, since he had elected to palm himself off as the *ne plus ultra* of negro

middleweights, it was meet and proper that he should dress the part.

The fact that his dabbling in the realm of padded mitts and powdered resin had been confined to three hectic months as punching bag for and third assistant second to a fourth-rate, battered-up, broken-down pugilist in New Orleans troubled him not at all. During that epochal period he had absorbed the patter of the prize ring as a sponge absorbs water, and the ease with which it dripped from his lips lent verisimilitude to his pugilistic pretensions. Certainly he had the coloured population dancing to his tune. Nor was there anything about his physique to give the lie to his bombastic claims. He was of medium height, alarmingly thickset, and boasted a square pugnacious jaw, a broad flat nose, and narrow squinting eyes. He declaimed voluminously of his prowess and achievements. And, close as he was to the shoals of pecuniary embarrassment, he was enjoying himself to the utmost while his cash held out. Later — well, he was highly indifferent about the future. That indeterminate era had a pleasant and infallible habit of taking care of itself.

He strolled four blocks, turned in at the gate of a cozy little cottage which nestled comfortably behind carefully cultivated flower beds, mounted to the veranda and rapped on the door.

Maldonia Rouse answered in person.

Maldonia was garbed for the street in a manner

that would have relegated the most radiant rainbow to pale colourless oblivion. She had permitted an amazing artistic sense to run riot in selecting the garments for her afternoon promenade with this latest social lion. She blazed with colourful glory.

Style was Maldonia's long suit. It more than atoned for the shameful neglect of her careless progenitors, who had imparted to their offspring no startling degree of pulchritude. There was a captivating *élan* about Maldonia that was decidedly more than skin-deep. She smiled roguishly.

"You is late, Cupid."

"Is I?" He shrugged indifferently.

"I ain't objectin'," she interpolated hastily, fearful of his resentment; "on'y I is been waitin' fo' a mighty long time."

"Is you?"

She smiled again.

"You is the leas'-talkin'es' man, Cupid! Le's go."

They rambled toward the centre of town, a truly resplendent couple. Maldonia's left hand rested proudly on Cupid's powerful arm. His eye caught the glitter of a diamond on the third finger.

"That a ginuwine di'min', Maldonia?"

"Shuah is!"

"Cleophus White give it to you?" His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yeh."

"You an' him is engage', ain't you?"

"Uh-huh! We is engage'."

"To be ma'ied?"

"Suttinly not! We is on'y jes' engage'."

"Oh!" sighed Cupid, vastly relieved. "Tha's diff'ent."

Eighteenth Street was a-seethe with the activities of midafternoon. The three negro photoplay houses were crowded with enthusiastic patrons; crowds eddied about the doors of the Penny Prudential Bank building, the imposing office structure owned by and for negroes; drays rattled over the network of car tracks; a steady stream of automobiles honked impatiently. Lining the curb were about twoscore languid young men, idling away the hours.

Cupid perceptibly slackened pace as they reached this Mecca of the city's Afro-American populace. He was sartorially pre-eminent and welcomed comparison. He and his companion approached the New Queen Vaudeville Theatre — Coloured Only. Against the lamp-post before the ornate portal of this model temple of amusement two young men were leaning — one a large, light-brown individual, with an alarming immature moustache; the other short, slender, and excessively prosperous in appearance.

The smaller man raised his hat to Maldonia. Cupid Baldon returned the bow. The large man stared frigidly at the girl and remained motionless.

Cupid stopped short, feet spread wide, cane twirling suggestively. He addressed the angry-looking moustached individual.

"Cleophus White, I done bowed to you!"

"That so?" Cleophus raised a pair of eyes shot through with jealous green.

"Yeh," retorted Cupid, with deadly earnestness. "An' w'en I bows to a gen'leman I mos' usuamly expects him to return my bow back."

"Expects ain't does, Mistuh Baldon."

"Ise waitin' fo' that bow."

Cleophus stiffened. He was thirty pounds heavier than Cupid. He opened his lips to consign the other to a region noted for the monotonous sameness of its weather reports. Then he closed his lips and raised his hat, eyes focussed on the girl.

"How you is this evenin', Miss Rouse?"

"Tol'able, Mistuh White; tol'able, thank you."

Mr. Baldon and Miss Rouse moved triumphantly on. Cleophus waited until his fiancée and her gentleman friend were safely out of earshot and then exploded with classic profanity. Florian Slapppy patiently heard him through. "You is shuah some elegant cusser, Cleophus."

Cleophus immediately eclipsed all past performances.

"If'n you feel that way 'bout it," suggested Florian pertinently, "whyn't you bust him one?"

"Huh! Swell chancet I got 'gainst a professional fighter."

"Reckon you is thutty poun's heavier'n what he is."

"Thutty poun's don't do no good if'n he cain't be hit. Besides, you know I ain't no fightin' man. Never has been."

"No-o; I ain't reckon you is."

The silence that ensued was long. Florian Slappey terminated it:

"Bet you is thinkin'."

"I is."

"'Bout Cupid Baldon?"

"Him an' Maldonia. Flo'ian, that gal is doin' me dirt!"

"She shuah ain't lovin' you to death; an' that ain't no lie. Had a fuss?" Florian grinned.

"No. It's jes' Cupid Baldon. That nigger is plumb went to her haid."

"Don't you go worryin' 'bout that, Cleophus; she ain't nothin' on'y a gal."

"Yeh — an' he ain't nothin' on'y a man; an' they's a heap of trouble been caused in this heah worl' on account of gals an' men."

"I would'n't let no wimmin go worryin' me, Cleophus. They's hell when they stahts."

"But s'posin' you was engage' to Maldonia?"

"I ain't."

"But if'n you was?"

"We-e-ell, if'n I was engage' to Maldonia, an' she was runnin' roun' premiscusslike with a prize fighter like what she is doin' with this heah Cu-

pid Baldon, I reckon I'd jes' nacherly fix him."

"How?"

"They's ways." Florian waved his hand airily.

"Which ways?"

"Gimme time to think. . . . Reckon he could git licked, coul'n't he?"

"Not by no man in this town."

"S'mother town, then."

"Reckon so. But that don't answer me nothin'. What I is interes' in is what happens to him heah. Maldonia thinks he is the greates' fighter in the worl', an' he could git knocked to Kingdom Come an' back again somewheres else an' come back an' smooth things over with her with jes' a few soft lies."

"Then," said Florian positively, "you is got to git him licked right heah."

"Ain't I done tol' you, Flo'ian ——"

But Florian was thinking and Cleophus fell silent. Finally the smaller man smiled broadly.

"Cleophus, is it wuth a hund'ed dollars to you to remove Cupid away from Maldonia?"

Cleophus gazed scornfully upon his friend.

"A hund'ed dollars! Shucks! That ain't nothin' on'y a baggytelle against how much I wan's to see that fo'flushin' prize fighter git his'n."

"An' you is shuah Maldonia ain't on'y lovin' him on account he's such a good fighter?"

"Tha's it — that, an' 'cause all the gals is crazy 'bout'n him; an' it sort of goes to a gal's haid when

a man which all the other gals wan's picks her out."

"S'posin'," suggested Florian happily — "s'posin' we could git this heah Cupid Baldon to make too much talk with his mouf 'bout'n he c'n lick any man of his weight in the worl', 'an' then git a real fust-class fighter down heah an' lick him — lick him reg'lar — Markis of Queensberry rules, an' all that? S'posin' that was to be — reckon Maldonia'd git sore at him an' th'ow him over?"

"S'posin'," returned Cleophus mournfully — "s'posin' I should inherit a million dollars, an' ev'ybody knowed I wan'ed to give a lot of it away on account I got a kin' heart; reckon I'd have much trouble findin' fellers which would take some? You is a good feller, Flo'ian, an' you knows heaps 'bout'n some things; but prize fighters ain't one of them things, Flo'ian — 'cause you don't know nothin' a-tall whatever 'bout'n them."

"I wa'n't on'y s'posin'."

"You is the indisputed chapeen s'posiner, Flo'ian. Yo' plan ain't no good a-tall, however, Flo'ian, fo' the simple reason that it's rotten. An', 'sides, they don't 'low no prize fightin' in Alabama."

"Don't 'low ain't got nothin' to do with the plan I got," responded Florian with dignity. "But if'n you is shuah I ain't got no sense ——" And he turned sadly away.

"That ain't it," pleaded his friend earnestly. "On'y I is a wo'ied man, Flo'ian; an' all I asts

you is when you talks to me please try an' talk a li'l' sense. I says thiswise: If they ain't 'low prize fighting, how you gwine git Cupid licked heah?"

"'Tain't gwine be no prize fight."

"You is 'bout as clear as coal dust, Flo'ian." Cleophus threw up his hands.

"Lemme splain." Florian's face broke into a broad, engaging grin. Explaining pet schemes was Florian's hobby, and he rode it verbosely and often. "They ain't no law gwine intumfere with this heah lickin' what Cupid Baldon is gwine git, on account they ain't no law in Alabama which says chu'ch members cain't box each other if'n they is on a picnic which the chu'ch gives."

Cleophus was still dazed.

"I reckon that is a elegant scheme you got, Flo'ian; but I ain't been heahin' nothin' 'bout no chu'ch picnic."

"Nor neither I ain't — yet."

"But if'n they ain't gwine be none ——"

"Who says they ain't?"

"But ——" Cleophus grabbed frantically for his wispy moustache.

"They is gwine be one."

"Which chu'ch?"

"I ain't shuah yet. Mos' prob'ly either the Fust African M. E. or the Primitive Baptis', on account both Rev'en' Plato Tubb an' Rev'en' Arlandas Sipse, which pastorizes them chu'ches, is got lib'al

views. Thing is this: I is gwine make talk with Rev'en' Plato Tubb, fust off, an' tell him to git up a picnic out to Blue Lake Pakk; an' the big feature is gwine be a athaletic ca'nival — wras'lin' an' baseball an' runnin', an' sechlike. An' the plumb biggest thing'll be a sparrin' match. Rev'en' Tubb'll fall fo' it — or, if'n he don't, Rev'en' Arlandas Sipseý will. Whichever one does will go to Cupid Baldon an' ast him will he box a exumbition fo' sweet cha'ity, on account all them proceeds is gwine to the chu'ch.

“Co'se, right off, Cupid'll want to know who he is gwine box with; an' Rev'en' Tubb ain't gwine tell him. ‘Oh, jes' some local amachure!’ he'll say. An' Cupid'll think it's a swell way he c'n show off befo' Maldonia, on account ladies will be there; an' he'll say yes, 'cause'n they ain't no man in town he cain't lick if'n they's near the same weight.

“It's gwine look like a imformal thing to him an' up to the day of the picnic he ain't gwine be wo'ied. An' he'll go boastin' roun' 'bout'n what he's gwine do to the other feller. Well, I an' you will write to Jockey Spider Hawkins, which is ridin' up to Latonia now, an' ast him to git us a high-class nigger fighter from over in Cinsnati fo' sevumty-five dollars an' espenses; an' then, jes' befo' the picnic, we is gwine let ev'ybody know 'bout'n this swell fighter which is comin' heah to lick Cupid.

“Co’se all the menfolks will on’erstan’ right off quick that it’s gwine be a real fight an’ not no sparrin’ exumbition; an’ they’ll all buy tickets an’ make the picnic a big success. Then, if Cupid ain’t all what he says he is, an’ gits skeered, he’ll leave heah absotively an’ ontirely — which’ll fix things all right ’tween you an’ Maldonia. But if Cupid stays an’ fights he’ll git licked so bad they won’t be nothin’ lef’ of him — on’y th’ee grunts an’ a wiggle.”

Florian placed well-manicured hands on slender hips and surveyed his friend triumphantly. He was infinitely pleased with himself as a schemer, and was particularly enamoured of that portion of his scheme which cast the unsuspecting Tubb in the rôle of prize-fight promoter.

“Now, Cleophus, what you got to say ’bout’n my plan?”

Solemnly Cleophus White reached for the right hand of his friend. He crushed it in a grip of devout friendship.

“Flo’ian,” he orated, “when a man is got a frien’ like what you is he don’t need nothin’ mo’n on’y th’ee meals a day to be the happies’ man what is. When you gwine staht off with this heah picnic talk?”

“Now!” retorted Florian pridefully. “They is a ol’ an’ true sayin’, Cleophus: ‘They ain’t nothin’ like a present’!”

It took just about fifteen minutes of adjectival

monologue to wind up all arrangements with the Reverend Plato Tubb, of the First African M. E. Church. Florian found the reverend gentleman beautifully responsive. Reverend Tubb constitutionally favoured anything which savoured of an inflated treasury, and his clerical mind did not sprout the suspicion that there might be something more to the scheme than mere altruism.

“Is you gwine ’range it?” he asked.

Florian smiled a broad, disarming smile.

“Nossuh, Rev’en’ Tubb; you is gwine make all the ’rangements. Co’s’e I’ll he’p with the details. They’s this heah Cupid Baldon ——”

“The prize fighter?” Reverend Tubb elevated his hands in pious horror.

“Tha’s which. If’n you asts him he is gwine do it. Jes’ a li’l sciumtific sparrin’ match — see? Co’s’e he’ll do it fo’ nothin’, on account it’s fo’ cha’ity. You go an’ tell him heah’s a good chance to show all the folks heahabouts what a fine boxer he is — ’thout gittin’ into nothin’ like a fight. Right off he’s gwine ast you who is he gwine spar with, an’ you’ll say you don’t know — jes’ any feller which we happens to pick up out to the picnic.”

“But s’posin’ they ain’t nobody willin’ to box with him?” queried the practical Plato.

“Somebody will!”

“But s’posin’ ——”

Florian had an inspiration.

“’Tween you an’ I, Rev’en’ Tubb, Cleophus

White is strong fo' this picnic on account he loves the Fust African M. E. Chu'ch so much; an' he said I should tell you he'd do it hiss'f if'n you coul'n't git no one else. Co'se you is got to make Brother Baldon promise sacred he ain't gwine hu't who we git to box with him, him bein' a preffessional an' who boxes with him nothin' on'y a amachure. On'erstan'?"

Reverend Plato Tubb understood. So did Cupid Baldon. Plato made him understand. Between interviews with Florian Slappey and Cupid Baldon, the Reverend Plato had allowed his enthusiasm to expand. He had become a zealous worker in behalf of the proposed picnic and athletic carnival. So he painted in glowing colours the glorious potentialities of the situation for Cupid. Cupid, after all, was the chief attraction; and Cupid's consent was all that was needed to insure the success of the undertaking. In outlining the plan Reverend Tubb — never one to go out of his way for the purpose of giving credit to another — refrained from mentioning the fact that the idea for the boxing bout had originated in the fertile brain of Florian Slappey, or that Florian was the bosom friend of Cleophus White, the faintly moustached gentleman whose fiancée was the root of the turmoil.

Cupid fell. He fell even though he was, at the outset, leery of the proposition. Cupid was not a fighter. He had never in his life stepped into a

ring save on the rare occasions when the broken-down boxer whom he had seconded conscripted him as human punching bag under the high-sounding title of sparring partner.

It was the offhand manner in which the Reverend Plato informed him that his opponent was to be "Jes' some man what we picks up out to Blue Lake Pahk" which did the work. Cupid realized that he knew just enough about boxing to insure his own safety in such a match. Win or not, he could at least cover and stall through six rounds with any amateur. He was vastly relieved by the Reverend Tubb's exaction of a promise that the affair was to be a sparring match for points and not to savour in any way of a battle.

It was all meat for Cupid. Should the bout prove a fiasco, he felt that he could alibi himself excellently by his promise to a gentleman of the cloth that he would inflict no damage upon his luckless opponent. He also intended to see to it that his adversary was given similar instructions.

The plan seemed burglar-proof. Cupid knew he had built for himself a fearsome reputation as a vicious fighter. And, so far as he knew, there wasn't another man in the city who understood the elementary rules of the noble art of self-defence. More — he banked strongly upon the psychological certainty that whoever his opponent was, the gentleman would enter the ring with an abiding respect for the professional.

And there was Maldonia to be considered. Cupid envisioned himself the victor in a flashy innocuous sparring match. He knew he was adored by the fair Maldonia largely because of her implicit faith in his tales of fistic achievement. From Cupid's standpoint the scheme was flawless; he stood to win great luscious gobs of glory without the slightest danger to himself or his reputation.

He accepted. He did so condescendingly, as a movie actor shakes hands with a mere playwright. The Reverend Plato was delighted. More so was Florian Slappey. And most so was Cleophus White.

Florian laboriously indited a letter to Jockey Spider Hawkins, then at Latonia. Three days later he received an answer:

Der bruther Florian:

I was sur glad to here from you yestday I went out at wunce and found just the man you want wich is a fin midelwait fiter name nockout dixy he is a fine fiter and will get thare 6 oclok trane mornin of the 15 wich you say is the picnic and I am shur he will nock hel out of this cupid baldon wich you rights me about and I shur hope he does and I got him for fifty dollars (50) and espensis I no that is alrite and right me about how the fite comes out becos this nockout dixy is sum class and you can bet your mony on him with lov to all and

trailed Cupid and Maldonia to the Gold Crown Ice-Cream Parlour. That soft-drink dispensary was crowded. March Clisby, long and lanky and eternally smiling, achieved the impossible behind the fountain, concocting creamy, fizzy, foamy drinks with lightning speed and mastered art. Corena, his fair young wife, presided in the cashier's cage. Small boys darted hither and thither through the good-natured crowd, serving the orders and collecting therefor. There was an audible hush as the hero of the morrow entered with Maldonia on his arm. They seated themselves at an empty table midway of the soft-drink emporium.

The chatter was again stilled as Florian entered with the fiancé of Cupid's lady friend. Cleophus and Florian deliberately selected seats at a table with Doctor and Mrs. Atcherson — a table next to that at which Cupid and Maldonia sat.

Cleophus dignifiedly ignored his fiancée and her loud-mouthed escort. Maldonia's nose tilted ceilingward. Cupid Baldon pounded on the table top with a hamlike fist and bellowed through the store:

“Boy, you ain't took our orders till yet!”

Conversation did not again become general. All eyes were focussed on the centre two tables; all ears were strained for some word hinting trouble.

But trouble seemed afar off. Apparently Cleophus had never been more happy or carefree. He chatted volubly with the negro surgeon and his extremely ample wife, casually discussing topics of

the day. It was Doctor Atcherson who fired the innocent question for which Cleophus had been angling:

"Shuah I is goin' to the picnic tomorrow. It ought to be a good success."

"Success is right!" answered Florian quickly.

"They jes' ain't no other name fo' it!"

"Who," inquired the doctor blandly, "is gwine box with Brother Cupid Baldon?"

Florian concealed a grin with difficulty. He glanced covertly at the fighter and saw that be-jawed individual leaning forward intently.

"Ain't you heard?" he temporized.

"No."

"'Twas thisaway," explained the dapper little schemer: "They wa'n't a man in this heah town would box with Brother Baldon; an' we dj'n't know which to do — on'y so happened it that luck played right into our han's."

"What you mean — luck?"

"Well, I is got a frien' up to Cinsnati which knows sumthin' 'bout scientific boxin', an' it jes' happen' so he was comin' th'oo t'morrow on his way to N'Yawleens. So I ast him would he stop over as a favour to me an' he'p out by sparrin' a li'l' with Brother Baldon; an' he says shuah he will. He'll be in on the six o'clock A. M. train t'morrow mawnin'."

"No! Not a reg'lar fighter?"

"One of the bestes middleweights what they is."

"No!"

"Yeh!"

The squinty eyes of the skinny little doctor were glowing with anticipatory joy.

"Mebbe ——"

Florian winked. He leaned forward and whispered confidentially to the doctor; but not so confidentially that his words failed to carry several tables distant:

"Co'se, bein' as the chu'ch is gittin' it up, 'twoul'n't do to say nothin' right out loud; but whenever real professional fighters git together they ain't gwine be no sof' an' fancy sparrin' pulled."

"Wha's the name of this fighter which is comin' in t'morrow mawnin'?" queried Atcherson.

"His name"—Florian chuckled—"his name is Knockout Dixie!"

Unconsciously Cupid Baldon grunted audibly. Into his mind there flashed vivid memory of a certain evening in Memphis — his fighting boss in the ring with the celebrated Knockout Dixie. The gong sounded for round one. There was a scraping of feet, a fusillade of padded mitts, and Cupid Baldon had leaped wildly into the ring to help tote his entirely unconscious employer to a malodorous dressing room.

If there was one middleweight whom Cupid Baldon held in abiding respect, that man was Knockout Dixie. Knockout bore a well-deserved

nom de guerre, and Cupid envisioned himself dragged from the ring, limp and lachrymose, after a single punch.

He rose abruptly and fairly dragged Maldonia from the Gold Crown. His air of braggadocio had departed.

"I ain't feelin' so awful good," he answered Maldonia's question. Florian saw, understood, and winked portentously at Cleophus.

The news spread like wildfire. After all the boxing match was to be a regular six-round fight. The great Cupid Baldon was going to mix things with the even greater Knockout Dixie, the Nashville phenom. There was a grand eleventh-hour rush for tickets. And finally a coterie of the *cognoscenti* cornered Florian and Cleophus.

"Is that on the level 'bout'n Knockout Dixie comin' heah to fight Cupid Baldon?"

"Uh-huh! Jes' stoppin' over fo' that pretickeler purpose."

"How come him to do that?"

"Jes' happen so." Florian grinned broadly.

"Haw! Reckon maybe Cleophus White ain't knowin' nothin' 'bout it — huh?"

Cleophus' six feet of massive height shook with merriment. He pulled at his near moustache affectionately.

"How come you to sispec' I got a han' in bringin' Knockout Dixie heah?"

"'Cause Cupid is been runnin' roun' with yo'

gal — tha's why! But the p'int is, Cleophus: Is you shuah he is gwine tu'n up t'morrow?"

"Jes' shuah's hell's made fo' bad niggers."

"An' if'n we bets an' he don't come?"

"Huh!" boasted Cleophus grandiloquently. "If'n Knockout Dixie ain't git heah t'morrow mawnin' I gwine see that Cupid Baldon gits licked in the afternoon if'n I is got to do it my own se'f!"

Dr. Brutus Herring, D. D. S., pushed his big frame through the eager crowd. Large as he was, he was shorter by an inch and lighter by ten pounds than Cleophus.

"Is you mean that, Brother White?"

Cleophus, secure in the belief that he could rely on Jockey Spider Hawkins, met Herring's eyes squarely.

"Shuah I means it!"

"You mean," persisted Herring, intent on fastening the other down to a statement he could not dodge later — "you mean that if'n anythin' should go wrong an' Knockout Dixie don't git heah, you is gwine fight Cupid Baldon yo' own se'f?"

"Positively!"

Dr. Brutus Herring faced the crowd triumphantly.

"You-all heah that, gen'lemen: Cleophus is promise' sacred that he is gwine fight Cupid Baldon if'n this other gen'leman don't git heah." A roar of spontaneous approval rose heavenward. Much

as the assemblage was licking its chops at the prospect of a bout between two famous professionals, it was even more desirous of seeing the rivals in the roped arena together. Grudge fights have a delicious savagery that mere money cannot purchase.

"They ain't no reason you cain't lick Cupid Baldon," commented Herring reflectively. "You is at least thutty poun's heavier, an' you is strong like a ox."

Cleophus shrugged impatiently.

"Don't make no diff'ence 'bout'n me. The p'int is that Knockout Dixie is gwine be heah; an' time he finishes with ol' Cupid Baldon that man ain't gwine know nothin' 'ceptin' on'y how angels looks."

"Tha's all well an' good," retorted Herring. "All I wan'ed to be shuah of is that they is gwine be a fight."

"They'll be a scrap, shuah nuff," reassured the exalted Cleophus, "pervidin' on'y that Cupid don't git a 'tack of col' feet an' beat it back to N'Yawleens, from where he come from."

Meantime the sadly perturbed Cupid was escorting Maldonia to her home. His naturally sluggish brain was hitting on all six cylinders. He was realizing poignantly that he had fallen into an extremely neat trap. Content in the knowledge that he knew sufficient about sparring to outpoint any raw impersonal amateur in a friendly six-round match, he had been hoist by the petard of

his own fondness for the spotlight. He had been entirely too anxious to display his professional wares for the delectation of Maldonia.

During the early part of the walk Cupid was entirely silent. What talking was done emanated from Maldonia. Cupid was speculating gloomily on the dull grey aspect of the morrow. He knew he had about as much chance with Knockout Dixie as a gelatin chicken in a rainstorm.

The first solution to the dilemma that presented itself was a prompt exodus, with himself as the exoduster; but sentimental and practical arguments prevailed against it. In the first and most important place, he was broke. For a long time he had been skating on dangerously thin ice, maintaining a sort of credit by his imposing front.

It was quite impossible to question the commercial rating of a hauteur such as his; but it was pecuniarily out of the question for him to attempt a long journey, and a short one promised to do him little good. His immediate need was for cash and plenty of it.

The idea of separating himself from Maldonia didn't cause him any particular worry. There had been great satisfaction, of course, in monopolizing the girl who wore the blazing engagement ring of the large and handsome Cleophus White. Cupid had instinctively disliked Cleophus at the outset; he resented Cleophus' too carefully nourished moustache. And Cupid had little real affection

for Cleophus' fiancée. Her open idolatry of his cosmopolitanism tickled his vanity; but matrimony had never wrinkled his brow.

He thought, then, of Knockout Dixie, and reflected sadly that by the sunset of another day all illusions Maldonia might yet retain concerning his fistic prowess would be thoroughly and permanently shattered.

He envisaged the inevitable culmination of the sanguinary encounter — himself sleeping peacefully on the canvas while Knockout Dixie towered triumphantly above him, and Cleophus White beaming pridefully and possessively upon the reclaimed Maldonia. He held no false hopes as to the lady in the case; once he was dethroned, it was a certainty that she would return promptly to her first true love.

Obviously it was Cupid's cue for action.

He racked his brain for the answer and found it flashing in his troubled eyes.

He was certain to lose. He had reconciled himself to the fact that, since flight was impossible, he must climb into the ring and meekly extend his jaw for a single soporific punch. But he, alone of those in the city, knew for a certainty just what the termination of the bout would be. There were many who thought he was due to be knocked out; but only he — Cupid Baldon — knew it! It was a sure-thing bet.

Cupid Baldon chuckled. Maldonia glanced up quickly.

“What you is laughin’ ’bout, Cupid?”

“Huh?”

“You done laughed right out loud.”

“Did I? Reckon it was ’cause I been thinkin’ what a s’prise this heah Knockout Dixie is gwine git t’morrow.”

“What you mean — s’prise?”

“He thinks he is gwine lick me.”

“No!”

“Yeh! An’ I was jes’ laughin’, thinkin’ of his face w’en I lan’s my ol’, trusty, haymak’, sho’t-arm right hook to the jaw an’ he goes down fo’ ’bout ’leven counts. Why, when I finishes with that man, Maldonia — they is gwine haf to scrape him up in a shovel! When I hits him I is gwine jar his gran’-children.”

“Shuah you is!” she affirmed loyally. “I’ll bet you is gwine squish him right.”

“Squish it is! I is gwine sink my fis’ so hahd in his stummick they is gwine haf to pull it out with a derrick — on’y —” He paused and a profound lugubriosity supplanted the grin that had lightened his face for a few brief moments.

“It’s a downright pity!”

“What?”

“That I can’t go bet on myse’f. I is losin’ the easies’ money I is ever made by that. You see,

Maldonia, I done loant my las' five hund'ed dollars out to a frien' in N'Yawleens las' week what wrote me fo' it to buy a autymobile; an' ontill he pays me back — which ain't till day after t'morrow — Ise pow'ful sho't of cash money."

"What you need with money?"

"I reckon some of you wimminfolks is been fooled, Maldonia, into thinkin' this wa'n't gwine be nothin' on'y jes a frien'ly sparrin' match. But, 'tween I an' you, Maldonia, folks which thinks that is plumb foolish in they haid. Yo' fiansey — that big lummix of a Cleophus White — is the one which is bringin' Knockout Dixie heah, thinkin' he c'n lick me. An' they's plenty which is foolish 'nuff to 'gree with him an' bet money on it.

"Now I is tellin' you the Gawd's truth, Maldonia — they ain't on'y gwine be two blows struck in that fight: I is gwine hit that nigger an' he's gwine hit the floor. Tha's all! Phooey! Jes' like that. An', seein' as that's the case, I is been thinkin' it's so't of a dawg-gawn shame I ain't got no money to bet on myse'f."

Maldonia cogitated intensively. The eyes of Cupid Baldon rested yearningly upon the scintillant brilliance of her engagement ring.

"If'n I on'y had some frien's who'd loant me a lil' money fo' jes' on'y twen'y-four hours ——"

"If'n I had some ——" faltered Maldonia weakly.

"'Tain't like bettin'," pursued the would-be fighter. "Bettin' is takin' a chance; an' the on'y

chance you is takin' this way is how quick you c'lect yo' winnin's. It's the same as findin' money. Co'se I woul'n't borry from you."

"Yes, you would," flared the mercenary Maltonia; "cause'n I'd make you. An' then I an' you could split the profits."

Cupid's brow cleared. His face broke into a radiant smile, as though she had presented a unique and brilliant suggestion.

"Dawg-gawn! That makes it diff'ent — don't it? — if I an' you is splittin' the winnin's. So, if'n you puts it on a business basicks, like what it ought to got to be ——"

"On'y I ain't got no money," she wailed.

"Yes, you is." He leaned confidently closer.

"Ain't."

"Is."

"Which?"

"That they ring!"

She flashed a startled glance at the ring.

"That'd be doin' Cleophus kind of a dirty trick, woul'n't it?" she queried, a bit doubtful of her ethical basis.

"Huh! He woul'n't even know nothin' 'bout it. He ain't hangin' roun' you much these days anyway. Mos' prob'ly he don't love you no mo'. An', besides, 'tain't like you was givin' the ring away. You could raise sixty dollars on that ring easy; an' by the time Cleophus an' that uppity li'l' shrimp, Flo'ian Slappey, gits finished with makin'

talk they is all gwine be willin' to bet they money on Knockout Dixie. An' it'd be like findin' sixty dollars. Then you'd have yo' ring back an' thutty dollars besides — an' they is some pow'ful han'-some clothes c'n be bought fo' thutty dollars."

Maldonia hesitated. She desired to make the venture, but was afraid. They argued the matter pro and con before the soft insinuations of Cupid won her over. When he parted from her half an hour later the ring was tucked snugly in his vest pocket and he was streaking it at record-breaking speed for a very liberal money lender with whom he was well acquainted.

The loan man stood for a seventy-dollar touch on the ring. Cupid Baldon left his sanctum feeling as happy as a man can feel who has the bitter-sweet knowledge that he is destined to receive a horrible beating and seventy dollars the following day. Cupid had abandoned all thought of refusing the battle; he knew the temper of his recently made friends and he understood full well that he was scheduled for the receiving end of violence — if not at the hands of Knockout Dixie, then from his erstwhile friends. And he preferred the scientific brand, with all the mercy extended by Marquis of Queensberry rules.

He made his way to Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor, and peered through the fog of cigarette smoke. Bud Peaglar himself bustled forward officiously to greet the

distinguished guest. There was a let-down in the din and the clicking of the ivory balls ceased temporarily. Following Bud came a score or more of fight fans, who clustered about the pair. Bud spoke:

"Evenin', Mistuh Baldon."

"Lo, Bud! How's tricks?"

"Fine an' dandy! Lookin' fo' some one?"

"Yeh."

"Which?"

"Boston Marble."

"Jackson Ramsay's bettin' agent?"

"Uh-huh!"

"What you wan's with him?"

"Huh! What you reckon I wan's? I wan's to place sevumty dollars which says I is gwine knock eve'lazin' tar outen this heah Knockout Dixie."

"No!" Bud Peaglar's eyes popped.

"Yeh!"

"You is bettin' sevumty dollars you is gwine beat Knockout Dixie?"

Cupid ostentatiously produced a large roll.

"Heah's the sevumty. Ev'y cent of that says I wins by a knockout."

"My Lawd! But he's a awful bad fighter, Mistuh Baldon."

"The badder they comes, the better I likes 'em, Brother Peaglar. I ain't never yet met 'em so bad they won't flop w'en my right hook tickles they jaw. I ain't use' that sho't-arm hook ve'y often,

because they's plumb danger that the man what I hits is gwine qualify right prompt an' sudden fo' tenor in a heavumly quartet. An' this heah sev-umty dollars backs them words."

A youngster by the door emitted a shrill squawk:

"Yonder goes Boston Marble 'crost the street."

Cupid and Bud Peaglar started for the door.

"I'll call him," volunteered the interested Peaglar.

"Never mind!" negatived Cupid, and darted across the broad busy thoroughfare. He linked his arm through Boston's and they strolled northward on Eighteenth Street. . . . "I been inquirin' 'bout'n you, Boston," opened Cupid.

The 'melancholy agent for Jackson Ramsay's lottery turned fishy eyes upon his companion.

"That so?"

"Yeh; an' they say you is pow'ful tight-lipped."

"Thet so?"

"An' that if'n you gits money to bet, you bets it like what you is tol', an' don't say nothin' to nobody 'bout'n it."

"Thet so?"

"My Lawd! Cain't you say nothin' on'y 'Thet so'?"

"Reckon so."

"Well, heah's the idee, Boston: Co'se you knows all 'bout this fight I is gwine have t'morrow with Knockout Dixie, don't you?"

"Reckon so."

"I wan's you to take this heah sevumty dollars; keep five fo' yo' c'mission an' bet the sixty-five. But the way you is to bet that sixty-five, Boston, is that I gits licked!"

Boston's sadly drooping eyelids flickered with an almost human quiver of interest.

"Say it again."

"You is to bet that sixty-five dollars against me! Git that? You is to bet that I is gwine lose! You is to bet that I gits knocked out! An' you ain't to say nothin' to nobody 'bout how I is bettin' — on'erstan'?"

"Reckon so. Thet all?" Boston gulped.

"Tha's all. Shuah you on'erstan'?"

"Reckon so. G'by!"

"G'by!" And then, as the elongated betting agent flapped mournfully out of earshot, Cupid added: "You po' misguided fish!"

At five o'clock the following morning, even before a clear sunrise gave promise of a perfect day for the picnic, Cleophus White and Florian Slappay were at the station to meet the train from Cincinnati. The train puffed under the shed strictly according to schedule. A heavy-eyed crowd streamed out of the coloured coach and through the exit gates. But in the crowd there was no Mister Knockout Dixie; nor was there any man who might by any flight of imagination have been mistaken for a professional fighter.

Cleophus' eyes met Florian's and between them

flashed a startled wireless. Cleophus had a sudden sickening idea that he had trusted Spider Hawkins not wisely but too well. He seized Florian by the arm and the two men got busy. They circulated through the crowd and quizzed a score of the coloured gentry who had made the trip southward from the Ohio metropolis. The more they questioned, the more convinced they became that Mr. Dixie was not only on the train but that he never had been.

The eyes of the two men met again — sadly. The defection of the fighting gentleman was cataclysmal. They chorused a tirade against the missing fighter and his jockey sponsor. Then, sick at heart, they retraced their steps to Florian's office, where they found a telegram :

“On account broken arm knockout dixie cannot leave to arrive for fight. Too late to get somebody else. Tuff luck!

“JOCKEY SPIDER HAWKINS.”

The door opened and Dr. Brutus Herring, followed by half a dozen fight-crazy friends in all their glory of picnic garb, entered.

“Where Knockout Dixie is at?”

Mournfully Florian extended the telegram. Gloom descended over the gathering. Only Doctor Herring smiled. And then he spoke, eyes focussed steadily on the massive muscular figure of Cleophus White.

“ You is got to fight him ! ”

Cleophus shied nervously. Certain as he had been that Cupid would crumple before the viciously professional onslaught of Knockout Dixie, just so certain was he that if he entered the ring with Cupid he might save his friends the annoyance of selecting a tombstone by personally attending to that detail in advance. He pulled nervously at the wisp of hair on his upper lip.

“ I ain’t no fighter,” he negatived.

A wild wolf-pack yell went up from the assemblage:

“ You promised if’n Knockout Dixie di’n’t git heah you’d fight him yo’ own se’f ! ”

“ I — I — I wa’n’t on’y jokin’.”

“ Jokin’ don’t go with us. We is paid our money to see a fight, an’ we is gwine see one if’n we have to th’ow you into the ring. Ain’t it so, Doctor Herring ? ”

“ Right you is ! ”

“ You is thutty poun’s heavier’n what he is, Cleophus, an’ they ain’t no reason why you cain’t lick him.”

“ He’s a preffessional.”

“ You promised,” grated Brutus Herring; “ an’ you is jes’ nacherly got to fight.”

Cleophus had built a Frankenstein’s monster. He glanced wildly at the stern set faces of those he had accounted friends and found nary a hint of mercy. He had pledged himself. More — he

had luridly proclaimed that if he should fight Cupid Baldon he would treat him even more roughly than Knockout Dixie would have done. He vainly regretted his empty boastings, mouthed when the possibility of Knockout's defection had not occurred to him. He hadn't left himself a single loophole. Of course he could flatly refuse — and forever lose caste. As for Maldonia, she would be irrecoverably lost to him.

"I'd mos' prob'ly git licked," he said weakly.

"Gittin' licked ain't no disgrace," retorted the dentist cheeringly. "Heaps of better men than what you is got licked by Cupid Baldon."

Such philosophy was poor consolation for the distraught Cleophus. He reflected with morbid satisfaction that he was paid up on his dues in the Over the River Burying Society, and that as Past Grand Royal Monarch of the Torchbearers of Glory, Council Number Ten, he would receive a regal funeral, led by the lodge's drill team in full parade regalia and a band of music. But he had an unpleasant hunch that personally he would not enjoy the obsequies.

"As I was sayin', 'tain't no disgrace to git licked," reiterated the dentist.

An idea came to Cleophus — an idea begotten of Brutus Herring's words. There was no disgrace in defeat. Very well, he would play the rôle of martyr; he would climb into the ring and assume a bold front. He would strut to the centre, shake

hands, and wait for a blow to land. And when it landed — kerflop! — he'd go down and out; an honourable defeat before a foe whose profession was fighting.

“ ’Tain't that Ise scared,” he remarked thoughtfully.

“ Co'se you ain't scared! You c'n lick him easy. You is said so yo'se'f; an' you is got plenty cause.”

“ Shuah! I c'n lick him — easy.”

“ Trouble with you,” sizzled Doctor Herring, “ is that you ain't got no confumdence. I is got a pow'ful strong hunch this heah Cupid Baldon ain't nothin' on'y a big-mouthed fo'-flusher. You is thutty poun's heavier an' a heap stronger. An' sencet you is got to fight him anyways ——”

At nine o'clock the melancholy Boston Marble had another visitor.

“ Mawnin', Mistuh White.”

“ Mawnin', Brother Marble. How you is feelin'?”

“ Tol'able.”

“ I is got a mission fo' you, Brother Marble. Co'se you won't say no repeats to nobody 'bout'n what I is sayin' to you?”

“ Reckon not.”

“ You know ” — nervously — “ Tempus Attucks, what hel' yo' job befo' you got it, was a pow'ful loose talker.”

“ Tempus Attucks is flew.”

“ Heah's the how of it: I is soht of got my foot

into sumthin'; an', 'tween I an' you, I is in bad. To brief things up: Knockout Dixie ain't showed up an' the picnic is jes' fixin' to staht out fo' Blue Lake Pahk. An' they is brought a heap of presuasion to bear that I is got to fight Cupid Baldon. On'erstan'?"

"Reckon so."

"I ain't got no mo' chance with this heah Cupid Baldon, which is a prefessional fighter, than what a baked ham is got with a hongry nigger. An', sencet I got to take a lickin', I says to myse'f I might's well make sumthin' outen it. So I got sevumty-five dollars heah which I wants you to bet fo' me; and you bet it that Cupid Baldon wins this heah fight. See?"

"I see."

"Co'se they ain't gwine be nothin' said 'bout'n how I bet, is they? I c'n trus' you?"

"Reckon so."

Cleophus departed, slightly solaced by the knowledge that, since he must be whipped, he stood to make seventy-five dollars — minus commission — on the deal. And he knew that he could trust Boston Marble to keep his secret. Saying nothing and saying it frequently was Boston's specialty.

Cleophus' money was placed with the betting agent under instructions to place it against himself. He was beset with a sudden gnawing doubt. He bethought himself that there was no one in the city willing to bet that he would win. That being

the case, his money would not be covered and he should take his beating without financial reward.

What he did not know was that, at that very moment, Boston Marble was sadly and conscientiously making two transfers in his ledger. According to his record as agent, Cleophus had bet seventy-two dollars and fifty cents that Cupid would win; and Cupid had bet sixty-five dollars net that Cleophus would be returned victor. Only seven dollars and a half—the difference between the principal placed with him by Cleophus, the amount bet, and the commission due—remained to be laid.

Downtown Cleophus swelled through the throng waiting to board the two special cars for Blue Lake Park and boasted of his own pugilistic prowess.

“Does you really think you is gwine lick Cupid Baldon, Cleophus?”

“Huh! Whippin’ men like him ain’t nothin’ on’y mawnin’ exercise fo’ me, boy. I is thutty poun’s heavier an’ th’ee times stronger as him, an’ when I an’ he finishes up they ain’t gwine be nothin’ lef’ of that Cupid ’ceptin’ on’y one feather on his off wing. I is steered clear of trouble with him’s long as I could, but when sweet cha’ity says I is got to fight I is gwine do it; an’ Cupid Baldon is goin’ to be the s’prisedes’ an’ sorries’ man what is.”

In due time the free boasting of Cleophus—who was seeking to hypnotize others into belief in his prowess, so they would bet on him and cover

the money he had placed to be bet against himself — reached the ears of Cupid Baldon.

That perturbed coloured gentleman, almost as afraid of Cleophus' additional thirty pounds of brawn and muscle as he was of the scientific and hard-hitting Knockout Dixie, streaked down to the dingy den occupied by Boston Marble.

"Is you placed that sixty-five dollars of mine yet, Brother Marble?"

"Reckon so."

"How?"

"The bet jes' says you is gwine lose."

Cupid chuckled shamelessly: "Brother Marble, that is the safes' an' sures' bet what ever was laid. G'by!"

The picnic was in full swing when Boston Marble put in his appearance at Blue Lake Park. The centre of attraction was a baseball game, then swinging to an exciting finish. Cleophus spied his betting agent and cornered that wall-eyed gentleman.

"Did you bet my sevumty-five dollars, Brother Marble?"

"Uh-huh!"

"All of it?"

"All 'ceptin' two-fifty, which is my c'mission."

"Elegant!" enthused Cleophus. "That is 'bout the sures' bet what ever was."

"Reckon so," retorted Boston Marble, without a flicker of interest.

He even failed to add that he had weighed the matter carefully and had decided that the ability of a professional fighter to lose if he so willed it was worthy of implicit confidence; and that personally he had assumed the remaining seven-fifty of Cleophus' money. The picnic was a howling, delirious success. The noon hour was made historical by a surpassing barbecue. Reverend Plato Tubb circulated fussily through the crowd and talked frequently and passionately with the elated treasurer of the First African M. E. Church, who gave glowing reports of the everswelling receipts.

The atmosphere was surcharged with tense expectancy. The crowd had divided into two factions — one clustering about Cupid Baldon, the other round Cleophus White. Both warriors boasted tirelessly of the lethal qualities of their favourite blows. Would-be bettors shook their heads and refused to wager; they didn't quite understand how the money would be paid out when both fighters had been exterminated. The fight had long since assumed the aspect of a grudge battle, and the crowd — male and female — was on edge.

“Ain't nobody know how long this heah fight gwine las',” chuckled Dr. Brutus Herring; “but while it does they's gwine be steam aplenty roun' that ring.”

Wagers were conspicuous by their absence. The gambling gentry could not bet on Cleophus and

dared not bet against him. Even Florian Slaphey and Dr. Brutus Herring, loudest in praise of the homemade warrior, were too canny to back their confidence with cash.

As for Cleophus, he was frightened to a pale green. He tried to concentrate on the seventy-two dollars and fifty cents reward that the fight should be short and painless. His spine turned to marrow and his heart to lead.

Cupid Baldon proved the better actor. He made considerable hay while the sun was shining. He rambled where the crowd was thickest, Maldonia on his arm, his stentorian voice rising above the din of hilarity. Inwardly he was excessively perturbed. He knew that, if whipped by so redoubtable a fighter as Knockout Dixie, he would be safely hidden behind a burglar-proof alibi; but the presence of the jelly-fishy Cleophus in the lists complicated matters.

Being no fighter himself, he held the latent ability of Cleophus in abiding respect. He wasn't sure whether Cleophus' boastings camouflaged a strong or faint heart. If the former, he knew he was in for an unscientific and therefore doubly vicious trimming. If the latter, he realized there was much truth in the adage anent the cornered rat.

Cleophus was thirty pounds heavier; and thirty pounds on the executive end of a five-ounce boxing glove makes considerable difference.

Cupid intended to lose, but he was wary enough

to lay his plans with meticulous care. He knew of Cleophus' threats and became sadly convinced that, however much Cleophus might expect to come out on the short end, he was determined to go down fighting. Mr. Baldon anticipated a very unpleasant few minutes. He knew just enough about the mitt game to stave off Cleophus' rushes for a round or two; so he planned to flop the minute Cleophus became unduly rough.

And by doing so he knew his prestige would be irretrievably lost. Defeated by Cleophus, the city would be decidedly too small for him. Therefore he planned to collect his defeat winnings from Boston Marble with the utmost dispatch and silently depart for another city — the more silently, the better. He was too wise in the ways of women to fancy for a split second that Maldonia would continue to lavish her affection upon him. He had even suspected for a considerable time that she was growing a wee bit tired of his eternal use of the personal pronoun and was casting hungry glances at the now aloof Cleophus.

At three o'clock in the afternoon the crowd surged through the narrow gates of the grand stand. Eager hands had long since constructed a rude but serviceable twenty-foot ring just in front of the home plate. Chairs had been placed in opposite corners; and beside each were large battered buckets containing water, and several obviously secondhand towels. By three-thirty the crowd

grew fidgety and commenced howling for action.

Bud Peaglar, proprietor of the justly famous Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlor, and by virtue of that eminence selected as third man in the ring, crawled under the ropes and silenced the crowd with a Delsartean gesture. He then announced sonorously the principals in the impending friendly boxing exhibition were at that moment preparing to enter the arena.

The raucous bellowings of the crowd were hushed. Only the womenfolks chattered. The masculine members of the gathering grinned gleefully at one another in anticipation of the gore that was destined to flow in the very immediate future. And in the front row on the grand stand, infinitely proud of the fact that all eyes were focussed upon her, was Maldonia Rouse, beloved of the two fighters.

For the first time in her young and sheltered life, Miss Maldonia Rouse was experiencing sheer unalloyed ecstasy. She sat in the full glare of the limelight, bedecked in her finest, and wearing her crown of laurel as modestly as a poet guest of the Ladies' Thursday Afternoon Literary Society.

An urchin in the bleachers turned loose a wild shrill yodel. The people on the grand stand craned their necks and then took it up. It became a roar that swept the field. Across the diamond, toward the ring, stalked the enormous figure of Cleophus White, enveloped in a heavy overcoat.

The home-grown warrior had never been quite so acutely miserable in the whole of his heretofore pacific existence. He wriggled through the ropes and sank limply on the rickety chair provided by the pompous master of ceremonies. His face suggested that he had recently mistaken tabasco sauce for tomato ketchup and was trying to get away with it.

Pliny Driver, a doleful employé of the City Ice Company, followed Cleophus into the ring and stood mournfully gazing over the heads of the crowd, paying no heed whatever to his principal.

And then Cupid Baldon appeared! Appearing was about the best thing Cupid did, and this particular appearance did nothing to lessen the terror that was gripping Cleophus' vitals.

Cupid was a study in futurist art. His bathrobe made Joseph's coat look like a shy and shrinking violet. He was followed by a retinue of seven grinning, self-important negroes, each bearing aloft a bit of battle paraphernalia — a box of powdered resin, towels, sponge, a new bucket, a bottle of ammonia, smelling salts, tire tape. For a few brief moments Cupid relaxed to the full enjoyment of the adulation commonly accorded a champion in his home town.

He placed his left hand on the corner post and vaulted lightly over the ropes. The crowd yowled. Cupid grinned, bowed, waved to a few particular friends, and boldly threw a kiss to Maldonia, much

to that damsel's delighted embarrassment. Then he turned and crossed to Cleophus, hand extended.

Cleophus, knowing nothing of prize-ring procedure, and fancying that this might be the commencement of hostilities, cowered and covered. Then he realized that Cupid merely meant to shake hands, and he extended a limp and fishy paw.

Four of Cupid's seconds collaborated in the selection of the two best gloves. Pliny sadly took the remaining pair. Five minutes later Bud Peaglar called the men to the centre of the ring, imparted verbose instructions and sent them to their corners.

Cleophus stood alone in his corner, staring with fascinated horror at Cupid's strictly professional antics. Larger than his opponent by a score and a half of pounds, he felt like a mere pygmy before this mountain of confidence. And Cupid made the most of his flickering fading glory.

He ostentatiously rubbed his shoes in the powdered resin. Then he shadow-sparred for a few seconds—"Jes' to git these heah muscles limbered up a li'l' bit." After which he placed both gloves on the ropes and pushed and pulled valiantly to make sure that they were strong and springy. Finally he turned.

"Ise ready, Mistuh Referee."

Bud Peaglar nodded and turned to Cleophus.

"Is you ready, too, Brother White?"

Cleophus gulped. As well ask a condemned

man, already strapped in the electric chair, whether he is prepared for the lethal current. In a hollow, sepulchral tone Cleophus delivered his pugilistic valedictory:

“ I is.”

The gong sounded. The two warriors — each of whom had bet upon himself to lose — dashed to the centre of the ring, paused abruptly and faced each other.

Cleophus, knees trembling visibly, jaw sagging weakly, stood with both muscular arms rigidly extended. He half closed his eyes, patiently awaiting the anæsthetic punch.

But Cupid Baldon had planned otherwise for Cleophus. He slouched into a pose made famous by one James J. Jeffries. His face grew deadly serious, arms travelling like twin pistons, feet tapping like those of a dancing master.

His gloves described marvellous parabolas in the air. He swished and swerved and slipped about the petrified Cleophus, who stood motionless, staring in hypnotic horror, arms still rigidly extended.

Cupid intended to lose; but he realized that if he went down and out in the very first round he would stand but a slim chance of getting away from Blue Lake Park with a whole skin. So he planned to let the fight rock safely along through a couple of rounds, then to rush with simulated savagery, landing soft taps upon the body of his opponent. After

which he would take a quiet shove and go down for the count. Perhaps that would satisfy the fans.

As for the onlookers, they stood up on their seats and roared with delight at Cupid's display of pugilistic pyrotechnics. The gentlemen in the crowd howled for blood, a plea that added limpness to Cleophus' already watery spinal column.

After half a minute it became patent to Cupid that Cleophus had no intention whatever of hitting him. With that cheerful knowledge, the supposed professional fighter became emboldened. He danced gracefully in, reached out a glove, and implanted a light and tentative tap on Mr. Cleophus White's nasal organ.

Whereupon Mr. Cleophus White dropped limply to the floor of the ring!

More — after landing carefully in a reclining posture, he turned over on his back, stretched his arms wide, and rolled his eyes in token of unconditional surrender. The spectators roared profuse disapproval. The prostrate warrior did not move. Bud Peaglar, referee, leaned over the fallen man and counted:

“One — two — th'ee — fo'——”

Cupid Baldon paused. Things were happening too swiftly for his brain to cope adequately with them. He stared in horrified amazement at the body of his antagonist. Into his mind there leaped a picture of the diamond ring he had borrowed from Maldonia Rouse, converted into cash, and bet

upon himself to lose. He joined the referee in pleading with Cleophus:

“Git up!” he howled. “Git up, nigger! I ain’t on’y hit you easy.”

“I— Ise ’licked!” returned Cleophus positively.

“—— Five — six ——” droned the referee inexorably.

Cupid’s air castles were crumbling. He was about to win the fight when the last thing in the world he desired was to be the victor. His whole worldly capital was bet the other way. And if Cleophus succeeded in being knocked out there would be nothing for Cupid to do but hit the cross-ties for parts entirely unknown — penniless and friendless.

“—— Seven ——”

Cupid acted. He leaned over Cleophus and slipped his gloves under the arms of the fallen man. He tugged, grunted, and tugged again. He lifted Cleophus to a sitting posture.

“Git up, Cleophus!” he wailed. “Git up — please!”

“—— Eight ——”

“Lemme ’lone!” snapped Cleophus peevishly. “Cain’t you see I is knocked out?”

“You ain’t knocked out. You cain’t be! Git up, heah!”

Cupid made one last frantic tug as the voice of Bud Peaglar intoned:

“—— Nine! ——”

Then his hands slipped and Mr. Cleophus White slid back happily to the floor, where he reclined in luxurious safety while the referee announced the fatal:

“—— Ten — an’ out!”

Somehow Cleophus White managed to get away from Blue Lake Park and to his room without being manhandled. Sitting on his bed he found the melancholy Boston Marble, who wordlessly extended to him one hundred and forty-five dollars. It was the first ray of sunshine to creep into Cleophus’ foggy cosmos.

“You win ’cause’n you los’,” drawled Boston, a bit ill over the fact that personally he had contributed a small portion of the fund he was handing over.

“Ye: — I won! But — but who was fool ’nough to bet I’d lick that they prize fighter?”

“Him.” The ghost of a smile creased Boston’s lips.

“Who?”

“Cupid Baldon.”

“Huh! My Lawd! Brother Marble, is you sittin’ they tellin’ me Cupid Baldon was bettin’ he was gwine lose?”

“Uh-huh! An’ that’s the money which you wins from him.”

Cleophus passed a limp hand across a perspiring forehead.

"Where Cupid is at?"

"The las' time he was saw," answered Boston Marble, "he was hitchin' hisse'f onto a freight train which was headed no'th an' travelin' fast."

Investigation disclosed the truth of Boston's statement. Cupid had vanished with commendable thoroughness. The news spread rapidly. No one quite understood it, but all knew that something was radically wrong.

And gradually a smile usurped the gloom plastered all over Cleophus' face; and that night at eight o'clock he presented himself at the Rouse homestead.

He found a huddled, sobby Maldonia, who flung herself wildly into his arms, loudly protesting her love. And then, between ardent and audible kisses, she told him of her perfidy in the matter of his engagement ring and of defection of the unscrupulous Cupid Baldon; of his winning with her money and departing with all of it.

Cleophus had recently become adept in quick and decisive thought. Almost before she finished speaking he pressed into her not unwilling hands seven ten-dollar bills and one crisp new five.

"Buy yo'se'f a new 'gagement ring, honey!" he ordered proudly. She burst into a fresh paroxysm of sobbing.

"You is too good, Cleophus; you is onti'ly too good. Where you git all this heah money?"

"From offen Cupid Baldon!"

"Eh! How come that?"

Cleophus puffed.

"I is a terrible misundumstood man, da'lin'. Yestiddy I learned that Cupid was bettin' he was gwine lose the fight. An' somehow — nev' min' astin' me how, 'cause'n it's a dead confumidential secret — I heard of him pawnin' my 'gagement ring to git that money he bet he was gwine lose. I made up my min' to beat him to it; so I went skallyhootin' to Boston Marble, which he was layin' his money with, an' bet my money 'gainst his money that I was gwine be the loser."

"Honey!"

"Yeh, Maldonia; tha's jes' prezac'ly what I done. An' tha's how come I to make a spectickle outen mysef this afternoon, sweetness — jes' 'count'n I loves you so much. An' I is won back the money fo' the 'gagement ring. An' mebbe we c'n git ma'ied soon — huh?"

"Whenever you says the wo'd, Cleophus; jes' whenever you wan's." She snuggled close.

Ensued a few minutes of ardent silence. And finally he sighed deeply.

"They is on'y one thing I regrets, Maldonia."

"On'y one thing?"

"Jes' on'y one."

"Tha's which?"

"I is always gwine be sorry Cupid Baldon di'n't go bet on hissef to win; 'cause'n if he had I'd shuah knocked him into the middle of nex' summer.

Hones', it was all I could do to keep from hurtin' that nigger bad when I had him at my mercy in that they ring!"

"Yeh," agreed Maldonia adoringly; "I could tell that from the way you fit."

THE QUICKER THE DEAD

CASHUS ROBERSON, the dull-mahogany treasurer of The Over the River Burying Society, reflectively chewed the stump of a veteran pencil and frowned. He bent intensively over his ledger and engrossed himself in a problem of simple subtraction: "Th'ee hund'ed an' th'ee dollars an' twen'y cents, less'n a hund'ed an' fifty dollars leaves a hund'ed an' fifty-th'ee, twenty. Two mo' go an' die right soon an' the sassiety goes bust."

The prospect was far from pleasing. The Over the River Burying Society was bread and butter and considerable cake to the slender, wiry Cashus. Each week about seventy-five per cent of the society's thousand members paid their ten-cent dues and from each dime which clinked into the official coffers Cashus took into himself one cent by way of commission. Weekly collections totalled between seventy-five and eighty dollars.

Too, there was the matter of prestige. His position, carrying with it the enviable perquisite of salary sans work, was of established eminence. Of course he did a bit of collecting now and then, but the society was not keen about forcing delin-

quent members to toe the mark. It operated on a hairline margin and retained its solvency only through certain members who paid their dimes for years and then ceased to do so — the proceeds from such members standing on the books as net profit. Recently, though, there had been a decided bullish tendency to the mortuary market and the death rate among members in good standing had deflated the treasury of The Over the River Burying Society to an alarming point. One hundred and fifty-three dollars and twenty cents remained in the bank. The death of another thoughtless brother or sister before the next dues day would force the expenditure of one hundred and fifty dollars for a funeral and leave a balance of three twenty. After which the reappearance of the Grim Reaper meant flooie for the venerable organization.

The door of Cashus' musty office opened and an utterly black face, bordered by a nap of kinky hair, insinuated itself within the room. The owner of the face — a richly dark individual of pronounced embonpoint and apologetic manner — glanced round apprehensively.

“Is you alone, Cashus?”

“No.”

The newcomer ducked. Cashus emitted a hoarse, humorous chuckle. “You is heah.”

Rocksy Morton's leviathan tummy quivered with appreciation of the joke. “You is the foolin'es' man!”

"Come in an' close the do' shut. Then gimme a seegar an' tell me what you is got on yo' min' 'ceptin' water."

Rocksy sank wearily into a chair and wheezed sadly. He proffered a rank two-fer and appeared relieved when Cashus wisely refused it. "This am a sad an' sorriful wo'ld, Cashus."

"Huh! Is you on'y jes' now makin' that 'scov-ery?"

"You soun's pestymistic."

"Tha's my middle name, Rocksy."

"Lot you knows 'bout trouble, Cashus — you with a sof' job like what you is got."

"Is got ain't will have."

"Cashus Roberson — you makes me ti'ed. You is so contr'y that if'n they was a thousan' pretty girls in bathin' suits walkin' right outside that winder yonder long with one ol' fat 'ooman which ain't got no shape at all, you woul'n't see nothin' on'y the fat lady."

"If I was there, Rocksy — they'd all be fat wimmin. Besides that ain't got nothin' to do with it. How come you thinks you qualifies as a trouble expe't?"

"I ain't think it, Cashus; I knows."

"Tell which."

"I is in bad."

"That ain't nothin' new fo' you."

"On'y this time it's sho' nuff bad. Ise skeered, Cashus, that me'n my job is about to separate."

Cashus perked up. "You is got a pow'ful good job, Rocksy."

"Tha's why Ise sad."

"You an' yo' boss ——"

"Not yet. Soon."

"Splain yo'se'f, Rocksy. I is became interes'."

"It's bout'n that hund'ed an' fifty dollars which I owes the 'stallment man, Cashus. I soht of went wrong on a few paymints an' all which I owes him is jue now. An' you know well's me, Cashus, 'stallment men ain't got no hea't. He 'lows that if'n I ain't paid up in full by t'night he is gwine garnishee me t'morry mawnin'."

"You woul'n't be the fust was ever garnisheed."

"No," gloomily, "n'r neither I woul'n't be the fust which my boss fires fo' same. Him an' garnisheein' ain't got no use fo' each other an' he is got a rule which says a 'ployé which gits garnisheed gits fi'ed ipsy fact'ry, an' if'n that ain't 'nough trouble fo' one fat, ma'ied nigger, Cashus, I asts you what is?"

"You sho' come to the right place fo' sympathy, Rocksy. But anythin' but that, I ain't got it. An' if'n you wan's mo'n that Ise guessin' you'd better be travelin' on."

Rocksy's enormous face took on an expression of intransigent lugubriosity. "You is always got money, Cashus — an' you is always been a good frien' to me."

"If havin' money means bein' a good frien',

Rocksy, then right heah an' now I becomes yo' wust enemy. Because money, Rocksy — money an' me has ceased an' stopped bein' frien's. Hones', if op'rations was sellin' fo' two bits I coul'n't git me a hair cut."

"Yo' sal'ry ——"

"They ain't on'y 'bout sev'n hund'ed an' fifty members been payin' they dimes Sat'd'ys an' that means I ain't makin' on'y seven dollars an' a halft a week. An' they ain't no mon c'n dress good an' save much money on that salary. You know that yo' ownse'f, Rocksy."

"But that makes bouten sevumty dollars net in the treasury come ev'ry Sat'dy, Cashus — an' you is the treasury."

Cashus spat disgustedly. "They ain't on'y a hund'ed an' fifty-th'ee, twen'y lef' in the bank now, Rocksy, an' tha's the Gawd's hones' truth. The members of this heah sassiety is been the most incumsideerate right recent. Reckon they is got the idee that they got to die because they fun'ral is all paid fo'. Why the way they been goin' an' dyin'—it ain't posutively decent, Rocksy — an' what with all we is had to be payin' out, the sassiety is mos' bust."

"Mos' ain't is."

"But mos' is mos' is, Rocksy, an' Ise tellin' you now that if'n two mo' members travels to Abryham's bosom right soon, one of 'em gwine travel 'bove groun', Rocksy, cause'n they won't be on'y

th'ee dollars an' twen'y cents lef' to pay fo' the receiver which the sassiety will got to have when the news gets out."

"Ain't no mo' gwine die," stated Mr. Morton positively.

"How come you to think that?"

"I got a hunch."

"Hunch don' make no nev'min's to the Angel Gab'iel. When he toots a nigger comes a-runnin'."

"Besides," clinched the stout brother, "mo' is a'ready gone an' died on the sassiety than what had a right to, an' the odds is a hund'ed to one they is finish' fo' this season."

Cashus Roberson passed a weary hand across a dark-brown forehead. "It soun's right, Rocksy; but when they is a deman' fo' nigger angels on high them what picks 'em out ain't pretickeler which buryin' sassiety they comes from."

"Stististicks ——"

"How we know heavum uses the same stististicks we uses? An' besides, what The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety got to do with you gittin' garnisheed outen a job?"

Rocksy cleared his throat and strove to make his manner casual. He placed one large paw confidently on Cashus' knee. "I soht of been thinkin', Cashus, that you an' me was such good frien's an' they ain't gwine be no mo' deaths in the sassiety fo' a long time — that — er — a, well, that mebbe the sassiety would len' me that hund'ed an' fifty

dollars which I needs countin' I ain't to git fired fo' bein' garnisheed."

Cashus laughed with ponderous sarcasm. "You talks like you been sniffin' happy-dus', Rocksy. The Over the River Burying Sassiety don' len' no money."

"I ain't astin' 'em to. But you is the treasurer an' you handles the money, an' if'n you was to borry that hund'ed an' fifty which you is in cha'ge of an' loaned it to me an' I was to pay it back, then they woul'n't nobody know nothin' 'bout it an' my job'd be safe. An' jobs ain't so free an' premiskerous like what they useter be befo' the war been over."

"Ain't it the truth, Rocksy? Ain't it now? But if'n I was to do what you wants an' they was to fin' me out they would be one job, Rocksy, which I woul'n't have no trouble gittin', an' that job, Rocksy, would be mendin' roads on the chain gang fo' britches of trus'."

"They ain't gwine fin it out."

"I knowed a feller got 'lectrickuted countin' he thought that."

"Ain't you got the money?"

"Yeh — but s'posin' some fool nigger went an' died on me after I loant you the mone'y?"

"Ain't no nigger gwine die."

"You an' Brother Death must of went to school together."

"An' even if some one did die, he woul'n't die

right soon. Time nex' member dies they is gwine be 'nough paid in to fix him up so's they won't be no kick."

"You ain't doin' nothin' but makin' a whole passel of foolish talk, Rocksy Mo'ton. What you asts jes' cain't be did."

"If'n you was sho' they woul'n't nobody fin' out ——"

"That'd be diffe'ent, of co'se. But me an' shuah things ain't been on speakin' terms fo' the longes' time."

"Yeh. . . ." Rocksy's checkered vest heaved tumultuously. "An' when I gits f'ed from where I is wo'kin' at an' has to go home an' tell Magnolia I ain't got no job no mo'. . . ."

Cashus choked commiseratingly. He envisioned the Amazonian Magnolia Morton, wife of his portly friend. Magnolia was a creature of short patience, very little judicial temperament, and prompt action. And Cashus had loved Rocksy since boyhood. The idea of Rocksy's immediate future, should he become bereft of work, saddened Cashus. Rocksy was entirely too soft to stand a drubbing.

Cashus owed much to Rocksy: the delights of single blessedness, for instance. He had officiated as best man at the magnificent nuptials of Rocksy and Magnolia. Later he had been the family intimate — and as such he had viewed with horror the metamorphosis of a coy and blushing bride to a strong-arm house boss with tank-corps proclivi-

ties. Treating Rocksy rough and treating him frequent was about the best thing Magnolia did.

And so mention of Magnolia's unbridled fury was the last straw on Cashus' camel's back of friendship. He hesitated; he cogitated vaguely upon mortality tables and the laws of probability, which were strongly allied with Rocksy. The impecunious friend, seeing that he had gained a point, drove it home vigorously.

He dwelt interminably upon the fearsome lot which would be his when he failed to make good with the installment man and was garnisheed out of a job. "The minute I missed one of them payments, Cashus, the whole balance what was lef' over become jue an' payable. See?"

Cashus saw; he saw sympathetically. He knew that Magnolia was considerably in the dark regarding recent financial flyers of her portly husband. She did not know, for instance, that after doling out the five-dollar instalments due the two Saturdays immediately past Rocksy had fallen by the wayside to be taken in by a few lodge brothers who manipulated the galloping ivories more expertly.

That was what hurt. Rocksy was in the unenviable fix of being forced into court without the equitable requisite of clean hands. And a picture of the militant Magnolia in action and spurred by thoroughly righteous wrath was the thing which melted to buttery consistency Cashus' naturally soft heart.

He fell. From first mention of Magnolia he had known that he would fall. Together the friends went to the Penny Prudential Savings Bank, where Cashus withdrew one hundred and fifty dollars of the society's money and turned it prayerfully over to his friend. He made the transfer reluctantly. He had an overpowering hunch that things were not going to run as smoothly as the optimistic Rocksy prophesied. Ethically, he was untroubled. Only fear of detection caused the apprehensive quivers.

Rocksy pocketed the money swiftly, bade an exceedingly brief farewell and streaked off in search of the loan man, the tail of his shiny Prince Albert coat flapping in the wind.

Cashus gazed after the fleeing figure of his friend, then he shrugged and turned away. The Rubicon once crossed, he ceased to worry. Worry is an annoying thing anyway, and Cashus found that there was sufficient to annoy him without bothering his head over a situation which could not be helped.

Therefore, in the days which followed, he resigned himself to the fates, passionately pleaded with Rocksy to beware of twin cubes, exacted a promise that the relieved job holder would fork over a five-dollar bill each Saturday night, and hurled himself with worthy zeal into the job of collecting ten cents per week from each of a thousand prospective corpses.

There was more than a little satisfaction in the knowledge that he had piloted Rocksy's matrimonial bark into fairly tranquil waters and that the ire of the loan man had been satisfied. Cashus found himself cast in the rôle of Good Samaritan and he liked it. But he did not fail to pray thrice daily that the Grim Reaper remember the mortality tables: "Ol' Death, you is done took the share what The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety owes you — now be a good spoht an' leave us alone fo' a while."

The loan to Rocksy Morton was made on May tenth. On the seventeenth, after a week of arduous work and three hours of intensive figuring, Cashus took financial stock. He had collected during the week seventy-five dollars in dues. From that he deducted his seven dollars and a half commission and added to the remainder five dollars paid in by the copiously grateful Rocksy and the balance of three-twenty which had remained after the initial loan. The grand total was seventy-five dollars and seventy cents: sufficient to bury one-half a member.

Business continued roseate the following week when eight hundred and twenty members paid their dues, the cash on hand at the conclusion of the bookkeeping séance being one hundred and fifty-four dollars and fifty cents. Cashus surveyed the figures proudly, heaved a sigh of vast relief and lighted a gold-banded five-cent cigar.

"Now let 'em die," he soliloquized, "an' see if they c'n make me mad."

As if in answer to his challenge the door opened and Keefe Gaines, the perpetually smiling undertaker, slid into the room.

"Evenin', Brother Roberson."

"Same to you, Brother Gaines; how you makin' um?"

"Tol'able good, brother — mighty to'able good."

Cashus smiled genially. At the present moment his horizon was unrippled.

"Same to me an' many of 'em, Brother Gaines. Seems as things is pow'ful perky fo' mos' ev'ybody heahabouts jes' now."

Brother Gaines t'chked and strove to conceal the professional elation which he feared might show in his voice, "Mos' ev'ybody," he amended. Cashus looked up sharply. Keefe Gaines appeared entirely too gleeful. Excessive joy on his part never augured well for the coffers of The Over the River Burying Society.

"'Ceptin' which?" inquired Cashus fearfully.

"You ain't heard?"

"No."

"Tha's what I come heah fo'."

The forelegs of Cashus' chair thumped angrily against the floor. "Splain yo'se'f, Brother Keefe Gaines, an' splain yo'se'f tho'ough."

"Don't git excited, Brother Roberson. 'Tain't nothin' on'y Brother November Spurling."

“Wha’s he suff’rin’ from?”

“Ain’t suff’rin’ from nothin’. He’s daid!”

“U-u-sh!” The monosyllable whooshed from the treasurer’s lungs. Brother November Spurling had been notoriously regular in payment of his weekly dimes. Cashus became vaguely aware that Keefe Gaines was speaking — speaking softly and happily:

“I is got my car downstairs, Brother Roberson, an’ I been thinkin’ you might come with me an’ view them remains which the locomotive lef’, same bein’ proof of death. Then you c’n gimme yo’ check fo’ a hund’ed an’ fifty dollars so’s we c’n git to work on the body.”

Within an hour the trip was completed, the society’s check properly inscribed and the undertaker departed on his mission of making it possible for the dear defunct to rest in peace and his relatives and friends to enjoy the glories of a regal funeral.

Treasurer Cashus Roberson headached himself over the ledger of The Over the River Burying Society. He made a final sorrowful entry, muttering “They’s one man, Brother Spurlin’, which is mo’nin’ fo’ you, sho’ ’nuff!”

MAY 24.

We got in bank	154.50
Pade Keefe Gaines for funrel for bruther nov. Spurling	150.00
Cash balince left	<u>4.50</u>

Brother November Spurling started off on the first leg of his journey to the coloured happy hunting grounds amid much fervid din. En route from the cemetery to the house of mourning, Brothers Cashus Roberson and Rocksy Morton fell into step and drew away from the procession. Rocksy was a bit backward about meeting Cashus' worried eyes. He was acutely conscious of the fact that as a mortality prognosticator he was a flivver; and his benefactor was hopelessly holding the bag.

"Tough luck, Cashus," he sympathized when the strain of accusing silence had broken through his guilty reserve.

"'Longside of this heah come-to-pass, Rocksy, rooster gizzards is plumb tender."

"Co'se I di'n't figger 'bout no member flirtin' with no railroad train."

"N'r neither I di'n't, Rocksy. But as figgerers me an' you ain't no pretickeler successes, Rocksy. An' right now I is wo'ied on account they ain't on'y fo'fifty lef' in the treasu'y."

"No mo'n that?"

"Nary copper. An' if'n 'nother member gits co'ted by the devil you is gwine see one pas' treasurer headin' No'th an' travellin' fas'."

"Ise plumb sorry, Cashus."

"Plumb sorry ain't wuth no cash, Rocksy. 'Bout all you c'n do is to jine me in prayer that no members even gits the stummick ache."

Rocksy had an idea. He beamed with it. "Any

members stay 'way from the fun'ral today, Cashus? They's a dollar fine fo' missin' one."

Cashus shook his head in gloomy negation. "They ain't never no nigger been bo'n which is gwine miss a fust-class fun'ral. We oughter make 'em pay a dollar to come. Be some hope then. Calvin Goins was the on'y member absent today an' he's been daid a month. An' he wa'n't a member nohow."

That night Treasurer Cashus Roberson slept fitfully. He had vivid dreams of a black-bearded gentleman with a scythe who hovered over a mass meeting of The Over the River Burying Society with a sign reading: "Cash on Hand, \$4.50."

He waked, took one look out of the window and turned miserably toward the wall. The heavens were overcast with low-hanging, swiftly scudding, grey clouds. A clap of thunder reverberated across the city and an all-day summer rain pattered against the loose window panes.

Cashus could not rest comfortably. He dragged himself to the window and gazed down upon the saturated street with its gutters already turbulent with rain. A few forlorn pedestrians ploughed through the wet, heads down and umbrellas up. Low, slanting roofs collected the rain, held it, then overflowed to the soaked yards below. An automobile skidded dangerously round a corner and narrowly avoided collision with a laundry wagon-

Cashus groaned: "If that laundry driver would of been a member of The Over the River Sassiety, the autymobile would of hit 'im sho'?"

Rain — soft, pattery, entirely wet rain. A grey dismal day, an ill-omened day. Cashus shivered. "Ise got another hunch," he said aloud, "an' ev'y time fo' the las' th'ee months I is had a hunch it's meant shellin' out lodge money fo' some member which has went an' died on us."

The hunch persisted and even a breakfast of bacon strip, grits and boiled coffee failed to cheer him. When he reached the executive offices of The Over the River Burying Society he was soaked to the skin with the mournful grey rain, which cascaded from his hat and coat and settled in small pools on the floor.

He glanced resentfully across the room toward the battered desk which was used by Semore Mashby, president of the society, on those rare occasions when that dignitary condescended to forsake his own manifold business interests to inspect the financial workings of the organization. The desk was an affront. Semore didn't have to come down to the office in such weather. The thought riled Cashus. He struck the desk with his clenched fist, stung his knuckles and swore heftily.

Cashus opened his own desk, doffed his damp coat, removed his new, sharp-toed russet shoes, lighted a cheroot, cocked his feet on the desk and

gave himself over to an orgy of misery. The interior of the office was more dismal, more gloomy than the exterior.

"Life," muttered Cashus, "ain't nothin' on'y one dam' death after another."

The door opened to admit Pliny Driver. Cashus heaved a ponderous sigh and gazed the other way. Pliny at best was but the personification of melancholy and today he was wet and dripping and decidedly at his worst. Pliny explained in his own profane way that he had been signally unsuccessful in an attempt to negotiate a flooded corner. "Gutters wa'n't meant to sit in," he finished dolefully. "Not fo' long, anyways."

"N'r neither this office ain't," snapped Cashus.

"Jes' drapped in to dry off an' pass the time o' day. Things shuah is awful."

"Huh! You ain't know nothin'. Not nothin' a-tall."

"'Twa'n't so bad when on'y members was dyin'," continued Pliny, "but when the president ups an' gits all of one foot an' halft of t'other in the grave ——"

Cashus was on his feet in an instant. He grabbed Pliny's skinny shoulders and shook that gentleman violently. "What kind of talk is that you is makin' with you' mouth, Pliny Driver?"

"Ol' Semore Mashby ——"

"Pliny, you ain't settin' there an' tellin' me that Semore Mashby is gwine go an' die on us."

"Uh-huh!" came the laconic answer, "tha's the ve'y same thing which he is doin'."

A little red devil romped across Cashus' desk and stabbed him through the left eye with a white-hot pitchfork. The stunned treasurer of The Over the River Burying Society groped blindly for his forehead. This was the ultimate, the disaster supreme. It was impossible of immediate conception. "Presidents ain't got no right dyin'," he wailed bitterly. "They jes' ain't got no right."

"Ain't you tootin' now? Ain't you jes'?"

Silence fell between them; a silence so pregnant with unhappiness that even the naturally morbid Pliny could not stand the strain. He rose quietly and oozed apologetically through the door, leaving the treasurer alone with his grief.

It was a grief which passeth understanding. Not that there was any love lost between Semore Mashby, President, and Cashus Roberson, Treasurer. It would have been difficult indeed to have discovered a single negro in the city who could have squeezed other than crocodile tears from his eyes over the passing of the buzzardy, elongated, money-grubbing president of The Over the River Burying Society. Semore Mashby was a hated man; an intensely black and self-opinionated individual who had gathered unto himself many riches by the practice of usury, with his fellow Afro-Americans as the usurees.

Cashus' grief was begotten entirely of Semore's

vast proportions as a liability. At the prospect Cashus wept and wept sincerely, for the death of the president presented a problem which was too much for a single mortal black man. Cashus was pathetically aware of the fact that Section Sixteen of the by-laws of The Over the River Burying Society read:

“When a President or a past President of the Society goes and dies he is got to be given a funeral which shall cost three hundred dollars and which three hundred dollars shall include the price and cost of a brass band for same.”

The worst of it was that Semore Mashby, incumbent, was the only president or past president extant. All those eligible under Section Sixteen had long since availed themselves of the opportunity of travelling to their reward with fanfare of trombones and snare drums blaring forth in jazzy discord. Which was one reason why Semore had continued in office. The society had found it an expensive proposition to elect a new president each second year. Those upon whom the honour had been thrust had shown too great enthusiasm for the three-hundred-dollar funerals.

“Coloured man,” communed Cashus dismally, “what you needs fo’ yo’s’e’f right now is a lily!”

The prospect of Semore Mashby’s early demise was one highly seasoned with action in which Mr. Cashus Roberson saw himself as the actee. In the

first place the insolvency of the organization would come to light, and close on its heels an investigation which could not fail to disclose that Cashus had borrowed one hundred and fifty dollars without the formality of putting the matter through the hands of the trustees. "I always knew," said Cashus to himself, "that they was foolish to make it so a treasurer didn't need no countin' sign on his check."

It would be discovered: Cashus knew it would. And he fancied that close on the heels of the discovery the investigating committee would recess for the purpose of adding another name to the list of departed officers.

The fact that the society could not — even with the help of the missing hundred and fifty dollars — have stood the strain of burying with music the sole surviving three-hundred-dollar member made no never-minds with Cashus. He knew one thing, one thing only and one thing thoroughly: He was one hundred and forty dollars short and his secret was about to become public knowledge.

There was, of course, the off chance that the doleful Pliny had allowed his enthusiasm to overpower him. A half hour later Cashus, freshly wet, was closeted with Dr. Vivian Simmons, a large, dignified, bespectacled, nut-brown gentleman of considerable medical ability, who was physician to the organization.

"I heahs Semore Máshby is sick," opened Cashus.

"You hea'd right," returned the doctor quietly.

"Is he ve'y ill?"

"Huh! Th'ee days from now we is all gwine be walkin' in a precession out to the cemetery a-singin' Hallelujah an' Semo' Mashby is gwine be leadin' the peerade."

Cashus shook his head with real grief. "Oh! Lawsy. . . ."

"Sence when you is been lovin' Semore Mashby, Cashus?"

"Ain't been lovin' him."

"You ac's like you was plumb sorry to see him die."

"I is."

"How come?"

"O-o-oh! Jes' 'cause, I reckon. Doc, you means that ol' scarecrow ain't got a chance?"

"Not no mo'n what a plantation nigger is got in a high yaller crap game."

Cashus h'isted himself from the imitation mahogany chair. He was a study in concentrated gloom. "Tha's what comes of invitin' folks to die fo' ten cents a week."

Cashus passed out of the office, into the elevator and was dropped to the ground floor of the Penny Prudential Bank Building. He crossed the lobby and emerged on Eighteenth Street, where he stood gazing upon the noisy surge of morning traffic

which slipped and skidded up and down the rain-soaked thoroughfare. Street car gongs, the bellowing of broad-shouldered truck drivers, the clangor of an ancient orchestrion in the lobby of Champion Moving Picture Theatre, the honking of automobiles all combined in a cachinnation: "Th'ee hund'ed dollars! Th'ee hund'ed dollars! Semore Mashby is bouten to die fo' th'ee hund'ed dollars!"

"Uppity ol' skinflint," wailed Cashus. "He ain't never done nothin' all his life but mean tricks, an' the meanes' which he is ever done is cha'ity compared with goin' an' wishin' a th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral on me now."

Cashus realized that this serious indisposition of Semore's was his cue for a sudden and complete exit from the city of his choice. But the city had treated Cashus well and long and he was disinclined to depart. Wherefore his none too nimble brain ground slowly into action and eventually he gave birth to the beginnings of an idea.

He turned westward on Second Avenue, forehead wrinkled in thought. And as he walked his shoulders lost their sag and his head went farther back on the shoulders. The idea was germinating. Then the dropping lips twitched and expanded into what was a fairly good imitation of a grin.

He accelerated his pace and his smile and finally came to a halt before a happily ornate establishment bearing above its attractive entrance the sign:

KEEFE GAINES

UNDERTAKER

I BURY OTHERS — WHY NOT YOU?

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

Cashus entered and seated himself in a swivel chair. Keefe produced a bit of very private stock and over small, brimming glasses they toasted the world and the hereafter.

“Happy days,” said Cashus.

“B’lieve me,” retorted the undertaker, “they shuah is.”

“Which is why I come to make talk with you, Brother Gaines.”

“I knowed it, Brother Roberson — an’ I assuah you it’s gwine be a real pleasuah to bury Brother Mashby.”

“Reckon so, Brother Gaines. On’y ’tain’t the buryin’ I is studyin’ ’bout.”

“You is wo’ied bouten sumthin’?”

“Consid’able.”

“Which?”

“Nothin’ bouten Brother Mashby’s fun’ral, Brother Gaines ——”

“Fine! Fine!”

“’Ceptin’ on’y how we is gwine pay fo’ it!”

Brother Gaines emitted a long-drawn “O-o-o-ooof!” and the broad smile skidded from his face. His financial dealings with The Over the River Burying Society had in the past been both pleasant

and profitable, because the cash-on-delivery methods of the society had assured him a thin but prompt profit. And it was only when such dignitaries as presidents and past presidents of societies and lodges passed away that he had the joy of trotting forth his very best three-hundred-dollar funerals. So, at the hint that there might be some financial hitch in the matter of the Mashby obsequies, Keefe Gaines became sad and attentive.

"You is drivin' at sumthin', Brother Roberson."

"You is a disce'nin' man, Brother Gaines."

"Meanin' which?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' tall, Brother Gaines, 'ceptin' on'y that the feenancial condition of the sassiety is preeca'iously low."

"How much?"

"Fo' dol ——" started Cashus incautiously, and then remembered. "Hund'ed an' fifty fo' dollars an' fifty cents, an' we is about to have a th'ee-hund'ed-dollar man die on us befo' nex' Juesday."

Keefe Gaines slumped forward in his chair. The blow was a stagerer, coming as it did in the midst of roseleaf dreams of a three-hundred-dollar funeral with music and excessive profit.

"Which means," intoned Cashus ghoulishly, "that The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety is gwine go bust an' Keefe Gaines loses a heap of business."

Gaines rose abruptly. "Sassiety ain't gwine bust!"

"How come you to think that?"

“ You looks happy, Cashus; an’ if’n the sassiety was gwine bust you’d look plumb sad. You is got a idee.”

“ Right, fust off,” grinned Cashus; “ idees is the easies’ things what I gets.”

“ ’Loocidate it.”

Cashus laid a confidential palm on the knee of Brother Keefe Gaines. “ You an’ me is in soht of the same boat,” he wheedled. “ If’n Ol’ Semore Mashby goes an’ dies an’ don’t git buried they is gwine be a ’vestigation an’ some uppity lawyer which belongs to the sassiety is gwine put us in the han’s of a deceiver; an’ then all the Over the Rivers which dies will have to be buried by theyselves on credick — an’ you know yo’ ownse’ef, Brother Gaines, that a fambly don’ bother they haid’s bouten credick fo’ a fun’ral after you is got the co’pse dug in good. So I comes to you with the frien’ly suggestion, Brother Gaines, that so’s they won’t nobody know that the sassiety is in a condition to liquordate that I pusson’ly will buy me a th’ee-hund’ed-dollar fun’ral fo’ Brother Mashby on the ’stallment plan.”

“ You buy it yo’ ownse’ef? ”

“ Uh-huh! An’ then the lodge pays me back fo’ it when the money comes in an’ you gits paid on the ’stallment plan.”

The smile reappeared on the face of the undertaker. “ Tha’s a reg’lar, sho’-nuff idee which you is got, Brother Roberson. As you says, we is both

in the same boat an' they ain't no reason why we cain't pull together. How much you is willin' to pay each week?"

"Five dollars."

Keefe grimaced. "'Tain't much."

"Mo'n nothin'."

In the face of such immutable logic the undertaker found himself wordless. Besides, he was very vitally interested in the solvency of the burying society and willing to go to considerable lengths to preserve it. "Ve'y well," he sighed, "we might's well draw up the contrac'. Le's see — hund'ed an' fifty dollars down ——"

"Whoa, bossie!" Cashus' fingers tightened round Keefe's knee and that gentleman jumped. Cashus was, for the moment, worried. He wasn't particularly keen about the undertaker's discovering that he had exaggerated the condition of the treasury by a hundred and forty dollars. "I ain't hearn nobody say nothin' 'bout no hund'ed an' fifty dollars down."

"Uh? Sho'ly you ain't mean you is gwine pay on'y five dollars a week 'thout no deposit?"

"Them is my intentions, Brother Gaines."

"Then they is bum intentions, which I ain't got nothin' to do with."

Keefe appeared determined and Cashus experienced a momentary quiver of apprehension. But he had played poker more than once or twice in his life and was not unfamiliar with the gentle art

of bluffing. He arose and shrugged indifferently.

“Reckon both on us is gwine lose a nice slice of cash money, Brother Gaines; a pow’ful nice lot of juicy coin.”

“Th’ee-hund’ed-dollar fun’ral; five dollars a week — sixty weeks — mo’n a yeah. . . . Oh, Lawdy, Cashus, tha’s umpossible!”

Cashus was loaded for such an opening: “Mebbe you is got a li’l sumthin’ on yo’ side, Brother Gaines. Mebbe so you is, an’ tha’s the truth. So Ise willin’ to meet you halft way. They ain’t nobody in this heah wo’ld cain’t say Cashus Roberson ain’t a fair man an’ a jus’ one; so if’n you is willin’, Keefe Gaines, I’ll buy that fun’ral offen you at five dollars a week, on’y I’ll pay you th’ee hund’ed an’ twen’y-five dollars fo’ it, the extry twen’y-five standin’ as instrus’ on the payments which ain’t paid yet. How bouten it?”

Keefe thought it over carefully and finally announced that it was all right bouten it. He wasn’t overkeen about agreeing, but he was in the position of making the best of a sadly shopworn bargain.

He pledged himself to staunchest secrecy — “’Cause if’n this heah news sh’d leak out,” threatened the astute Cashus, “even by acstident, I reckon I’d make the sassiety pass a resumlution that heahafter ’stead of payin’ cash they’d buy their fun’rals offen you at five dollars a week.”

“Ain’t no chancet Ise gwine drip no sech news,”

retorted the mortuarian, "an' fu'thermo', if'n you pays me the fust five dollars now I'll give you a receipt fo' the th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral on a sep'rate contrac' an' buy you a drink fo' brawtus."

The money changed hands and a half hour later they departed for an extremely *sub rosa* establishment which existed for the purpose of catering to the liquid hankerings of dark-skinned citizens. A portly female suggested that they name their poison.

"Gimme a Sweet Lucy," said the undertaker.

"Huh!" grunted the exalted Cashus. "Ain't no Sweet Lucy gwine satisfy me now. I wants one of them Son-Kick-Yo'-Mammy drinks."

They touched glasses, drank, paid and parted; Cashus supremely happy and Keefe trying to figure out just where he stood on the proposition. He felt that he ought to be happy over the averting of financial disaster, yet even the soothing qualities of the fierce Sweet Lucy could not entirely persuade him that matters might not have been better. And Keefe yearned to be convinced that he had not been taken in. Wherefore he returned to Sweet Lucy. He remained with that liquid lady until very late. When he left he had only one regret in the world: He wanted to kiss Cashus, and Cashus was not there to be kissed.

As for Cashus, that gentleman walked on air. He had steered a shoal course and come through right side up. "If'n some other brother or sister

don' go die on me," he reflected, "ev'rything'll be chicken."

Cashus was very happy that night. So was Keefe Gaines. Keefe was still trying to solve — with the aid of Sweet Lucy — his financial problem. And so the following morning Cashus hopped from his bed feeling as fit as a fiddle and as happy as a lark and Keefe Gaines groaned miserably, took the pledge, drank quantities of ice water and yearned passionately for some person upon whom he might practice his profession.

Cashus dressed, made his way to a restaurant, where he absorbed four soft-boiled eggs, a quantity of toast and two cups of coffee, and then proceeded to the office of Dr. Vivian Simmons in the Penny Prudential Bank Building. The ebony young lady in charge assured the visitor that the doctor would be in shortly. "He's done been settin' up with Brother Mashby all night," she said, "an' he jes' this minute telyphoned he was on root heah."

Cashus waited patiently, whiling away the time by flirting with the responsive office girl. For the first time in two weeks his mind was free from worry. Finally the ground-glass door swung back and Dr. Vivian Simmons breezed into the room.

Dr. Simmons' clothes were bereft of their razor-edge creases, the horn-rimmed spectacles were slightly awry, there was a worn, tired appearance to eyes and lips, but he was smiling with frank triumph.

“Mawnin’, Brother Roberson, mawnin’.”

“Same to you, doc. Young lady heah tells me you is been wo’kin’ with Semore Mashby.”

“I is that, Brother Roberson, an’ because of same you sees befo’ you the happies’ an’ proudest’ man which is in this heah city.”

“Reckon Semore must of gone daid. You looks happy.”

“Happy ain’t no wo’d fo’ it, Brother Roberson. But about t’other you is plumb wrong, fo’ I is jes’ experience’ the professional triumph of bringin’ back a depahted brother from the grave.”

“Huh?”

“I is exquisitely proud to pernounce, Brother Roberson, that Brother Semore Mashby passed his crisis early this mawnin’ an’ is now on the road to recovery an’ also gittin’ well!”

“You — you means to infohm me, Doctor Simmons, that Semore Mashby ain’t gwine die? Not a-tall?”

“Not even a li’l bit. He is gwine live fo’ many yeahs to come. I is saved his life.”

Cashus mounted slowly to his feet. His face was wreathed in disgust. “Saved his life! Huh! You is committed murder, Doctor Simmons; tha’s what you is went an’ done.”

Cashus departed from the office suddenly and completely, leaving the man of medicine with dropping jaw. He made his way with greater haste than dignity to the undertaking establishment,

where he discovered Keefe Gaines stretched out on a cooling board with a once white rag bound tightly round a head which throbbed and pounded. Keefe was quite convinced that all the world was wrong and Cashus with his five-dollar-a-week financial schemes the wrongest thing in it. He felt a personal grudge against Cashus. He raised his aching head, glimpsed his visitor and emitted a hoarse, pained croak: "Git outen heah, nigger!"

"I is come to see you bouten ——"

"Git out!"

"I wan's to tell you ——"

"If'n you ain't outen heah in two minutes an' a halft, Cashus Roberson, I is gwine embalm you where you stan's!"

Cashus was not to be driven. He was as desperate as Keefe was ill. The undertaker made a heroic effort to carry out his threat but gave it up as a bad job after a single nauseating lurch toward his particular aversion.

And so, with the undertaker lying supine on the cooling board, Cashus told him of the untimely recovery of President Semore Mashby of The Over the River Burying Society. "So," he finished, "I ain't got no use fo' that th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral."

"I ain't studyin' 'bout what you ain't got no use fo'."

"It's yo' fun'ral."

"You is a liar, Brother Roberson," returned

Keefe politely. "It's yo' fun'ral, an' I is got a writin' which says its your'n. An' if'n you thinks you is gwine git me to take it offen yo' han's you is the mistakines' nigger which ever walked into this heah house of happiness. You is gwine pay me five dollars a week fo' enough weeks to make th'ee hund'ed an' twen'y-five dollars an' the on'y thing I hopes is that you is gwine be the one to use it when it's done all paid fo'."

"But Brother Gaines ——"

"Don' you go buttin' me. An' if'n you wan's to try my temper, Brother Roberson, you jes' go an' miss one li'l single week's paymints an' I'll say a few things at a sassiety meetin' which will bust you an' yo' job an' the whole dam' sassiety higher'n a kite. Now git out — sudden — an' travel fas'!"

Cashus realized that further sojourn in the vicinity of the peeved Mr. Gaines would only serve to make a bad matter considerably more rank, and so he got. He got precipitately. He strolled sadly to Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlour, ignored the many greetings directed his way, fought his path through the smells of the culinary department and sank gloomily into a chair in the far corner. He lighted a cheroot and lost himself behind the smoke screen.

"When I useter think I been unhappy," he cogitated, "I ain't know nothin'. This time I is mis'able, shuah nuff. On'y happy thing is I got me

a fun'ral case'n I need it, an' if'n anythin' mo' happens Ise li'ble to do that ve'y same thing. As fo' that ol' so'haid, Keefe Gaines, I is got a good min' to go an' die on him befo' it gits paid fo'."

The predicament in which he found himself was, to say the least, unenviable. He was possessed of a perfectly good three-hundred-dollar funeral upon which only five dollars had been paid. For many months he was destined to shell out five good, hard dollars every week for something he did not want and which he could not dispose of until the contrary Semore Mashby elected to cash in, at which time he could reimburse himself from the lodge funds by selling his funeral to The Over the River Burying Society.

The fact that for the ensuing twenty-eight weeks the five-dollar burden fell on the fat shoulders of Rocksy Morton was little solace. The prospect of the thirty-odd weeks which followed Rocksy's twenty-eight was drab indeed. For a few wild moments he meditated murder as the easiest way out. Should he thus accelerate Semore's interrupted journey to the hereafter he could give that reverend gentleman the three-hundred-dollar send-off which was his due under Section Sixteen of the by-laws and take unto himself the first moneys coming into the society treasury thereafter. He thought the plan over from every angle before discarding it as impracticable.

Cashus had a fine funeral on his hands and he

didn't want it. Nor did he know any one who did. It was an asset only potentially. For many months it was stuck on the liability side of the books. And yet there must be some way out of the situation. To Cashus' mind troubles had only been invented to be avoided. And, thinking so, his thoughts turned to Lawyer Evans Chew, first and last resort of the city's coloured populace in time of legal stress.

Lawyer Chew was very, very glad to meet Brother Cashus Roberson, and woul'n't he have a seat and a cigar? Brother Roberson would. Both. What was Brother Roberson's trouble? The slender, immaculate, light-brown attorney leaned forward with a friendly smile on his lips. A half hour later he heard the finale to a free and full confession.

"I is placin' a heap of trus' in you, Lawyer Chew," wound up Cashus, "but if'n a man cain't talk plain to nobody, who c'n he talk to?"

Lawyer Chew doffed his spectacles, polished them meticulously with a lavender silk handkerchief and replaced them carefully. "You is trusted the right man, Brother Roberson."

"Hope so. P'int is: C'n you ext'icate me outen the fix what I is in?"

"Reckon so. Of co'se, Brother Roberson, I is, as you a'ready knows an' mus' be aware of, official attorney an' counsellor an' also legal representative fo' The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety ——"

"Uh-huh! Tha's the ve'y 'zact reason why I puck you out to come to."

"An' my fust duty is to the sassiety."

"If you don' 'cept no fee from me."

"Mmm! P'r'aps so." The lawyer rose, crossed to the window of his office and gazed down upon the traffic seethe of Eighteenth Street. "You is in a mos' unfortunmate position, Brother Roberson."

"You spoke a mouthful then, Lawyer Chew."

"An' while some way out ——"

"They is got to be some way out. You git that fun'ral offen my han's an' cl'ar me up with the sassiety, Lawyer Chew, an' I'll give you twen'y-five dollars, cash money."

Lawyer Chew extended his hand solemnly. "It's a deal, Brother Roberson. Fust off, I asts you — is I got a free rein?"

"Absotively."

"Then you go on out from heah an' leave me to study the dicta an' decision of the Supreme Co't of this Sove'eign State of Alabama in such cases parallel to this which we has under due an' careful consideration as made an' pervided. An' whatever you does, an' whatever I does, Brother Roberson, which you don' understan'— I asts you to keep yo' shirt on an' remember that Lawyer Chew always brings his clients out topside up."

Cashus looked up hopefully. "You is got a idee?"

“ Soht of. Co’s e I is got to study it over. . . .”

“ What you wan’s me to do?”

“ Nothin’— that is, I reckon ’twont do no hahm if’n you stops by an’ sees Rocksy Morton. Tell him you is tol’ me the whole truth bouten this heah perdickerment an’ then send him down heah to see me. Mos’ likely I’ll want to make talk with him if’n this plan which I is thinkin’ over works out.”

“ What you want to make talk with him ’bout?”

“ The less you know bouten what I is thinkin’ of plannin’, Brother Roberson, the happier you is gwine be. You is a flivver as a fixer an’ when I handles yo’ case I prefers to han’le it ’thout yo’ advice. Now trot along.”

Cashus trotted. Somehow Lawyer Evans Chew compelled docility. He dispatched the bewildered Rocksy to Lawyer Chew’s office and awaited that portly gentleman’s long-delayed return. And when Rocksy did come back his pudgy face was a study in bewilderment.

“ Is you know Lawyer Chew ve’y well, Cashus?”

“ Terrible well. Why?”

Rocksy shook his head slowly. “ An’ you got a heap of confumdence in him?”

“ Uh-huh!”

“ An’ you say I is got to do what he says?”

“ Yeh — shuah. Why?”

“ Nothin’. . . . He’s into’ney fo’ the sassiety too, ain’t he?”

“Wha’s that got to do with it?”

“Ise got a idee, Cashus, that Evans Chew is plannin’ to be a better ’torney fo’ the sassiety than what he is gwine to be fo’ you.”

Cashus grabbed his friend by the hand. “What you mean by makin’ sech a passel of pestymistic talk? Splain yo’s’e’f what he’s gwine do.”

Rocksy shook his head grimly: “Cain’t do it, Cashus. If’n I tol’ you an’ Lawyer Chew foun’ out — which he shuah would — he says he’d plumb ruint me an’ you an’ all of the whole sassiety. It ’pears to me like you is in the fishpond whichever what way you looks at it, Cashus. An’ tha’s about all the imfo’mation I is at libbity to give you.”

“Aw!” snorted Cashus, “how come the good Lawd to make you sech a cheerful feller, Rocksy?”

“Ne’min’,” returned Rocksy. “You ’ten’ that meetin’ of the sassiety t’morrow night. I is gwine be there. An’ you is gwine git a s’prise, Cashus; a pow’ful strong s’prise. But you ain’t to blame it on me, Cashus, because it’s all Lawyer Chew’s doin’s.”

Cashus got the surprise. It was more than a surprise: it was a dash of ice water on the spinal column of his equanimity. For, with the meeting at its bedlamic height, Rocksy Morton mounted to his enormous feet and delivered an oration as impassioned and revolutionary as it was obviously prepared by a head other than Rocksy’s.

The gist of his speech was that Section Sixteen

of the by-laws was a colossal error. The giving of three-hundred-dollar funerals to presidents and past presidents, averred Rocky, was unjust, undemocratic, opposed to the principles of the organization and above all an extravagance which should be dispensed with. With great flourishing of arms and salvo of adjectives he presented a motion amending Section Sixteen to such an extent that presidents and past presidents should go a hundred-and-fifty dollar route to their reward.

Cashus listened in petrified horror. He could not credit the evidence of his senses. It was plain that Lawyer Chew had doublecrossed him and made Rocky his mouthpiece, and the glance which Rocky sent Cashus' way said, plain as words: "Ain't I done tol' you?"

The abolition of the three-hundred-dollar funeral clause in the by-laws meant disaster to Cashus. It put him in the position of paying three hundred and twenty-five dollars in weekly installments of five dollars each on a funeral which he could never hope to dispose of, and which he did not want for himself.

He leaped to his feet in a frantic attempt to spill the beans, but the dapper, dandified Florian Slappey, who was presiding in the absence of the ill Semore Mashby, beat him to it.

Florian Slappey doted on popularity and no move could have been more popular with the general membership of The Over the River Burying

Society than one which was designed to cause mental discomfort to Semore Mashby. Semore was hated of his brethren; a man who had attained to presidential eminence only through power of money. He was the dark-skinned Cræsus of the city and as hated as a man can be and yet escape the tar pot.

And so Florian Slappey ignored all rules of parliamentary procedure and seconded the motion with a fervour not to be denied. Why should Semore Mashby, he queried, not be placed on the same hundred-and-fifty-dollar plan with every other member? Why should his chances of a happy hereafter be doubled? "Absu'd, redickerlous, ain't to be stood, brethren an' sistern. Ise in favour of Brother Rocky Morton's motion!"

The motion whirled through without a dissenting vote. There was a riot of acclaim as Florian announced with gusto that the ayes had it. And the following morning Cashus Roberson descended upon Lawyer Evans Chew and delivered his personal opinion of barristers in general and Lawyer Chew in particular.

The man of law heard him through with considerable patience. He even smiled.

"Huh! Brother Roberson — I ain't even stahsted yet."

"The devil you ain't! Well, you jes' git this in yo' haid, Lawyer Chew: If so you ain't stahsted yet you take my advice an' stop befo' you does. Because if'n this ain't the beginnin', the real com-

mencement is gwine fin' one lawyer missin' from this heah town an' they won't be no good into'ney lef' to defen' me fo' yo' murder."

Chew smiled genially. "You 'pears to take it hahd."

"Hahd!" howled Cashus wrathfully. "Hahd! You reckon I ought to be sayin' 'Thank you?' When I come to you fust off I been payin' on a th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral which I stood a chancet of sellin'. Now I got the same fun'ral on'y I ain't nev' gwine git rid of it ontill I use it my own se'f."

"Who says you ain't gwine git rid of it?"

"I says so."

"Who's you?"

Cashus choked.

"Lawyer Chew, sometime you is gwine temp' me too far an' they won't be nothin' lef' of you on'y a red stain."

"Ain't I done tol' you from the fust you was to keep yo' shirt on, Brother Roberson?"

"Lot a good my shirt does me when you is ruinin' things."

"You ain't got yo' good sense, Brother Roberson. Like I was sayin' befo', when you comes to a good lawyer like what I is for help, you gits real, hones'-to-Gawd help. Now I is done all what I is done with a pu'pose. I is got a scheme fo' you to git rid of that fun'ral which you is got."

Cashus perked up. "Hones'?"

"I never has schemes which ain't hones'."

"I mean hones', is you got a scheme?"

"Yeh. N'r neither that ain't all. You is not on'y gwine git rid of that they fun'ral, Brother Roberson, but you is gwine make a fat profit on same."

"Uh. . . ." Cashus tapped his forehead significantly. "Is you all right there, this mawnin', Lawyer Chew? Ev'y bit?"

"Co'se. Why?"

"Cause'n I ain't askin' fo' no mackerels, Lawyer Chew. Jes' gittin rid of that they fun'ral 'thout losin' . . ."

"You is gwine make a profit."

"Splain how."

"Thisaway: You is at presint seized an' possessed of a fust-class, bang-up, th'ee-hund'ed-dollar musical fun'ral. They ain't a member of The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety or pusson which ain't a member of same which don' want that fun'ral — specially now senst they ain't even presidents gits one like it. Ve'y well," he leaned forward triumphantly: "Brother Cashus Roberson, you is gwine raffle off that fun'ral fo' five hund'ed dollars!"

"Eh?"

"At one dollar per each fo' the chances."

Cashus rose. He was groggy with delight. He bowed low. "An' tha's why you had Rocksy put that motion th'ough the sassiety — so's the big fun'ral would be a real extinction?"

"You is got the idee."

Cashus bowed low. "You is a genius, Lawyer Chew. An' if'n you puts the thing acrost you gits from me a fifty-dollar cash-money fee 'stead of the twen'y-five which I promised. Now go ahead an' work that raffle."

Lawyer Chew worked it.

The tickets were printed in record time and announcement was made through the fiery pen of Crispus Breech, wild-eyed editor of *The Weekly Epoch*, that Cashus Roberson had come into possession of a fine funeral which he was raffling off at one dollar per chance. "Think of the opportunity to get a high-tone funeral for a dollar," enthused Breech. "It's a opportunity which a man don't get more often than once in a lifetime."

There was a mad stampede for the tickets. Even Semore Mashby, who had recovered from his near fatal relapse engendered by the society's recent action in reducing him to a plane with the other members, bought a couple of tickets.

Two weeks later the elated Cashus Roberson reported to Lawyer Chew that the last of the tickets had been sold. He pleaded for permission to issue more of them. "They's so many niggers wants them," he argued. But Chew negatived the idea.

"How's the lodge treasury now?" he inquired.

Cashus consulted a thumbed notebook: "In the las' two weeks the net, which means total c'lections less'n my c'mission, has been one hund'ed an' thutty

two dollars an' thutty cents. Then they was ten dollars which Rocksy Morton paid me back an' fo'-fifty lef' over after that las' fun'ral. That makes a hund'ed an' fo'ty-six, eighty, which the sassiety has got in the bank, not countin' the hund'ed an' thutty which I still owes them outen the money which I loant Rocksy. That'll come outen this heah raffle money."

Lawyer Chew chuckled. "Got mo' confidence in me now than what you had?"

"B'lieve me, Lawyer Chew, you is some tootin' man an' that ain't no lie. Is you gwine be at the drawin' t'night?"

The attorney shook his head. "No, I don' want to be connected with this in any way. 'Twould'n't be ethical fo' other folks to know I was."

The drawing was held in the spacious hall of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise. A small lottery wheel had been borrowed for the epochal occasion.

It seemed that every man, woman and child of the coloured persuasion possessed a ticket. Some had paired up, contributing fifty cents each for the coveted pasteboard with the understanding that if the ticket won the co-owners were to shoot high dice for the honour of a three-hundred-dollar interment.

No raffle of a house and lot or even an automobile could have excited such enthusiasm. The ticket holders were keyed to fever pitch. Old men, young

men and women were jammed in shoulder to shoulder. The women who clung to the outer fringe were particularly anxious to win, for the possession of a three-hundred-dollar funeral assured them an unassailable social prestige.

The hour for the drawing arrived. A little girl was blindfolded; the glass wheel was whirled. The folded numbers pitched and tossed within sight of all. The wheel slowed down—then stopped. Eager black faces craned forward; there was an audible silence. The little girl inserted a skinny arm and withdrew the winning number.

Dr. Elijah Atcherson by reason of social pre-eminence and the fact that he was not a ticket holder was selected to open the number. With enormous gusto the skinny little surgeon relieved the child of the paper. He posed proudly, then unfolded the lucky slip; did it slowly, magnificently.

“Hund’ed an’ sevumty-one!”

A groan chorused to the roof. Apparently nobody held a hundred and seventy-one. But suddenly from the sad silence there came a wild triumphant yell: “Tol’ you niggers the good Lawd wa’n’t gwine stan’ fo’ no’ fumadiddles with me! Tol’ you so! Heah’s Number One hund’ed an’ sevumty-one!”

Cashus Roberson took one look at the elongated, frock-coated figure which was surging madly through the crowd clutching ticket Number One

hundred and seventy-one tightly in a talon-like hand. Cashus collapsed against the wall.

"Wigglin' gol'fish!" he ejaculated. "Semore Mashby wins his own fun'ral!"

Cashus Roberson progressed rapidly to Keefe Gaines' undertaking establishment where he paid over the balance of three hundred and five dollars still due on the funeral and took a receipt in full. Then he went to the bank and made out a deposit slip in the sum of one hundred and thirty dollars in the name of The Over the River Burying Society and heaved the first untroubled sigh in two fortnights. With sixty-five dollars in his pockets he sought Lawyer Chew and cheerfully handed that gentleman five crisp, new ten-dollar bills. "It's cheap at the price, Lawyer Chew."

The attorney tendered a good cigar. "Is you ontily satisfied, Brother Roberson?"

"You is the bes' lawyer which they is in this heah town."

"Took you a long time to fin' that out, Brother Roberson."

"I knows it now. By the way — is you gwine be at the meetin' of the sassiety t'morrow night?"

Chew chuckled. "I sho' is — with bells on."

"Wha's the joke?"

"They's gwine be some fun, Brother Roberson. You seems to fo'git that I is 'torney fo' The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety same as I is fo' you.

If'n you wan's to see some fun with Semore Mashby you be there. It's gwine be better'n a picnic."

The word was passed and the attendance was record breaking. Every member not too flagrantly in arrears was loudly present. The routine business was dispensed with and at the call of "Fo' the good an' welfare of the sassiety" Lawyer Evans Chew received recognition from President Semore Mashby.

Lawyer Chew ostentatiously inserted a cough drop between his teeth, sipped unctuously from a glass of water, placed his right hand on his breast and proceeded to orate.

Orating was the best thing that Lawyer Chew did. He commenced with the sixth day of the creation and followed the history of the universe down to the present meeting of The Over the River Burying Society. He warmed to his subject. And finally he mentioned the name of Semore Mashby, buzzardlike and hated president.

His remarks anent Semore were oratorical gems of the purest ray serene. Semore wiggled in his chair and blew hot and cold by turns. For a few seconds he fancied that he was being eulogized and immediately thereafter equally certain that he was the subject of a libellous dyslogy. And so Chew swung from one extreme to the other while the spectators sat back, revelled in Semore Mashby's discomfiture and wondered what was coming. Finally they learned.

“ At the las’ meetin’ of The Over the River Burying Sassiety,” roared Lawyer Chew, “ a law was passed that presidents an’ past presidents don’t git no mo’ th’ee-hund’ed-dollar fun’rals, but on’y hund’ed-an’-fifty-dollar ones. Sence that time I is been studyin’ the decisions of the Supreme Co’t of the United States an’ the co’ts of las’ reso’t in the other states of this great an’ noble Union which we lives in. Ladies an’ gen’lemen, I is heah to say that the above-mentioned law which was passed at the las’ meetin’ ain’t wuth the paper it is wrote on, so far as Brother Semore Mashby is concerned.

“ For why, brethern an’ sistern — I asks you that — for why? ’Cause, feller members, ’cause if’n it applied to him it would become retroactive legislation an’ at the same time *ex pos’ facto* an’ unconstitutional an’ void. It ain’t right an’ it cain’t stan’ nohow. So as légal adviser fo’ the sassiety I declares that Semore Mashby is ontitled to a th’ee-hund’ed-dollar fun’ral from the sassiety an’ all future presidents comes under the hund’ed-an’-fifty-dollar rulin’.

“ I’u’thermo’, I suggests that if they is any members presint which thinks I is wrong about this heah thing, they keeps they mouths shut because they don’t know nothin’! So, brethern an’ sistern, I makes a fo’mal motion that what we done las’ meetin’ be undid so far as Semore Mashby is effected.”

There was no getting around Chew's oratory. Where he led his coloured brethren followed. The motion was carried by acclamation and duly entered on the minutes. Once again Lawyer Chew rose to his feet. He was frankly enjoying the spotlight.

"An' now, my frien's an' feller members," he said, "we is got a funny condition heah befo' us. Brother President Semore Mashby is possessed of two th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral's an' on'y one life. He is gwine git one from the lodge an' he jes' win one in the drawin'. So as he is president of the sassiety an' is got the good of the same as heart, I siggests to Brother Mashby that he sells his fun'ral which he won to the lodge fo' two hund'ed dolars cash.

"In that way, the lodge gits the th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral fo' two hund'ed dollars cash an' hol's it ontill Semore Mashby dies, when, an' at which time, they gives it back to him. It's his own fun'ral all the time an' he's two hund'ed dollars to the good. What you say bouten that, Brother President Mashby?"

Brother President Semore Mashby said yes. He had been dazed by Chew's oratorical logic, but not too dazed to realize that he had no use whatever for two funerals. He made over his bill of sale to the society and pocketed two hundred dollars.

That night a triumphant Lawyer Evans Chew

and a completely bewildered Cashus Roberson sat in the executive offices of The Over the River Burying Society. Chew was pencilling on a bit of paper. Finally he spoke:

“Lis'en at this, Cashus Roberson. You is now free from the debt which you borried from the sassiety. You is got fifteen dollars cash in yo' pockets, an' as you is a'ready made good to the sassiety, the hund'ed an' thutty dollars which Rocksy Morton still owes he owes to you; so you is a hund'ed an' fo'ty-five dollars to the good. “Keefe Gaines is not on'y sol' a th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral 'thout waitin' fo' no president to die, but he is sol' it fo' th'ee-hund'ed an' twen'y-five dollars, which gives him twen'y-five dollars extry profit.

“Semore Mashby is got a hund'ed an' ninety-eight dollars mo'n he had to begin with and is still gwine git a th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral when he dies.

“Rocksy Morton is got his job an' the money which he owes is owin' to a frien'; so they ain't no danger to him of garnisheein'. An' me, I is got a fifty-dollar fee which is clear profit.

“But better'n all that, Brother Roberson, The Over the River Buryin' Sassiety ain't not on'y on its feenancial feet again, but it's gone an' bought itse'f a fine th'ee-hund'ed-dollar fun'ral fo' two hund'ed dollars which makes a hund'ed-dollar profit it has made. What you think of that?”

Cashus Roberson shook his addled head wonder-

ingly. He did a little intensive figuring. "Sufferin' tripe! Lawyer Chew — you is a wonder sho' nuff! 'Cordin' to that they ain't nobody los' nothin' an' 'mongst us we is five hund'ed an' eighteen dollars to the good an' ev'ybody is happy. I ain't quite on'erstan' how that comes to be."

Lawyer Evans Chew waved his hand airily. "The answer to that is ve'y simple, Brother Roberson, an' should always be bore in mind: It all comes from hirin' a good lawyer!"

ALLEY MONEY

OTHELLER HEYWARD eased into Birmingham with twenty-one dollars and forty cents in cash, a screamingly red vest, an aversion to work and a genius for landing right side up. He was a golden-brown individual of plentiful size and taking ways. His personality was hypnotic and his smile wide and winning.

He tried it out on the stony-faced clerk of the Happy Hotel and it worked. Otheller got the best room in the house without the formality of a cash deposit. He ate a hearty meal at Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlour and later horned into an open two-bit game of Kelly pool. When he snuggled comfortably between the sheets shortly after midnight he had voluntarily paid for his room three days in advance and counted a cash balance of thirty-one dollars.

At nine o'clock Otheller waked and lay staring idly at the spot on the red carpet where the sunshine was brightest. He pillowed his head on large uncalloused hands and gazed southward from his window toward the crest of Red Mountain a half mile away. A faint contemptuous smile creased his lips. Things had a habit of breaking Otheller's way and he had a hunch that Birmingham was destined to treat him very well indeed.

He dressed leisurely, with meticulous attention to the fit of his coat, the crease of his trousers and the symmetry of the knot in his cerise scarf. He absorbed an enormous breakfast of sausage, rolls, hot cakes and coffee; made numerous inquiries of the hotel clerk and progressed without haste to the Penny Prudential Bank Building. He parted from the elevator at the fourth floor and paused to admire a groundglass door bearing in golden letters the inscription:

ISAAC GETHERS

MONEY TO LOAN

ALSO GRAND MAGNIFICENT HIGH POTENTATE

OF CHAPTER NUMBER TWELVE

THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF I WILL ARISE

Otheller pushed the door and paused on the threshold. He stared with deliberate appraisal about the musty, poorly furnished sanctum with its battered furniture, rusty iron safe, dilapidated counter; and finally his eyes fell upon the individual who was importantly seated in a swivel chair before a desk on the other side of the counter.

The man was large, nearly as large as Otheller himself, but the visitor was conscious of an impression of buttery softness and excessive girth as he looked upon the man at the desk. He felt an almost uncontrollable desire to reach out strong

fingers and pinch. He fancied a pinch would hurt the other man beyond all reason.

The potentate rose and waddled to the counter.

“ You desires to consult with me? ”

Otheller summoned the most winning smile in stock and plastered it all over his countenance.

“ I sho'ly does. My name is Otheller Heyward an' I seeks you out as a member in good standin' of Chapter Number Twen'y-nine, The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, of Meridium, Missisippi. Heah is my credenshuls.”

Isaac Gethers glanced briefly at the proffered cards and extended a limp and flabby hand to the newcomer.

“ Exquisitely delighted to make greetin's with a visitin' brother,” he enthused. “ I trus'es you will make yo'se'f to home while you is heah in Bum-min'ham. I is Isaac Gethers, Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of this chapter which we has heah.”

Otheller deftly produced two good cigars, one of which he pressed upon the unreluctant Isaac. The other he inserted unctuously between his own smiling lips.

“ It's a pleashuh to meet a man like what you is, Mistuh Gethers, an' I hopes that our acquaintance will be long an' flourishin'.”

Isaac inhaled one satisfying puff and seconded the motion. He glanced approvingly at Otheller's sartorial perfections — the checkered suit, the crimson vest, nearsilk shirt, mouse-coloured spats, tan

shoes with toes like the forepeak of a rhinoceros. Otheller looked like ready money and lots of it.

“You is gwine be with us any considerumble while, Brother Heyward?”

“Sho’ly. I is heard tell a great heap bouten Bummin’ham, Brother Gethers, an’ I is came heah with the idee of remainin’ pummanently an’ fo’ a long time if’n the town comes up to specificatiums. As you mos’ prob’ly knows, Meridium ain’t so lively like it might be an’ I somehow ain’t never been content up to Chicago an’ St. Looney so I sorter got desired with the idee that Bummin’ham would make a good in-betwix’.”

“You ain’t makin’ no mistake, Brother Heyward, an’ we is proud to welcome a new addition to our cullud community. May I ast what line of trade you is in?”

Otheller conscripted an ingratiating smile and waved a deprecating hand.

“Me, I ain’t in no pretickeler business, Brother Gethers. That is, you might so call it that I is by preffession a politician. Me an’ politics went to school t’gether an’ I knows all what they is to know bouten that from lodge ’lections to choosin’ a President fo’ the U-nited States. Durin’ my las’ visit up to Chicago I was chose a ’ficial at the Republican Presidenshul Convention.”

Isaac’s nerves hopped. He experienced a sudden qualm of revulsion; convinced on the instant that the man before him was not only a crude prevari-



cator but insulting as well in presuming that his wild story was convincing.

“A ’ficial?”

“Yassuh, at the presidential convention up to Chicago. An’ I c’n prove it.”

Isaac was sceptical, but he admitted that the man’s manner was more or less convincing. Being a naturally polite and noncombative chap he dropped the subject, which was just as well, else he might have cornered Otheller and learned that the gentleman from Mississippi had officiated as doorman.

The two men smoked in silence for a few minutes. Isaac was anxious for his guest to depart and too polite to make the suggestion. Otheller was grimly cataloguing his prospective victim.

“Easy money,” he told himself. “I c’n twis’ him roun’ my li’l finger.”

Finally Isaac punctured the silence:

“What is you cogitatin’ on doin’ while you is heah in town?”

Otheller smiled genially.

“Tha’s what I come to see you about, Brother Gethers.”

“Me?”

“Yaas.”

“What I is got to do with it?”

“Soht of thought yo’ chapter of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise might need the se’vices of a man like what I is.”

Isaac instinctively put up his guard. An affluent stranger and a seeker after a job were different animals entirely.

“How come?”

“Increasin’ the membership ——”

“We is got all the members which we needs.”

“Seein’ that the jues is paid?”

“We don’t have no trouble with members which don’ pay their jues. We jes’ drops ’em an’ ’lects others what will.”

“Well, p’r’aps in yo’ private p’fession of broker you needs a expert man?”

Isaac was rapidly becoming peeved; he had long since attained a high degree of impatience. He had ceased to respond to the other’s personality. Isaac was fresh from a hectic matutinal session with Mrs. Gethers and not inclined to view persons or things in their most advantageous light.

“I is ve’y busy, Brother Heyward,” he remarked curtly, “an’ I reckon they ain’t nothin’ a-tall I c’n do fo’ you in the line of puttin’ you onto a job.”

Otheller stiffened defensively. The use of the vulgar word “job” in connection with employment for himself irritated his finer sensibilities. He put out a delicate restraining hand.

“You ain’t quite on’erstan’, Brother Gethers.”

“I on’erstan’s all right — you wan’s wuk.”

“No, indeed. Iff’n they happened to be a position open ——”

“Strangers in Bummin’ham don’ git no posi-

tions," snapped Isaac crossly. "They gits jobs or they gits 'rested fo' fragrancy."

It was dawning gradually upon the newcomer that he had not made the anticipated favourable impression upon the Grand Magnificent High Potentate of the local chapter of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise. He abandoned his smile and rose in solemn dignity.

"I is so'ly afraid, Brother Gethers, that you is not use' to meetin' a man of my type."

"Tha's where you is wrong, Brother Heyward. I meets too many jes' like what you is. You wan's sumthin' fo' nothin', an' same bein' the case I is tellin' you that you is came to the wrong town. What you gits heah in Bummin'ham, you wuks fo'."

Isaac was petulant. The man had scratched his raw nerves, otherwise Isaac would never have given way to his usually placid temper. A closer friend of Isaac's would have understood and forgiven him, for any intimate would have known that Christeen, the wiry and militant wife of the soft and flabby loan man, had been on a rampage with the result that there had been a family row in which Isaac had come off sadly second best.

But Otheller was not familiar with conditions in the Gethers household and he grew exceedingly riled at the untoward discourtesy of the man he had honoured by seeking in connection with employment. He was still too much the politician

to allow the full measure of his rancour to creep into his voice.

“ I is quite shuah, Brother Gethers, that you has jumped too quick at c'nclussions. I is a Christian gen'leman, Brother Gethers, an' cause'n you ain't been perlite to me I merely hopes that some day I is gwine have the chance to do you a favour, countin' I don' bear no grudge 'gainst no man.”

He bowed himself grandly from the office, leaving Isaac already a bit contrite over his irritability. But once outside the door Otheller was metamorphosed; a determined look flashed into his little eyes and he shook a large and bony fist toward the ground-glass door.

“ They ain't on'y one other man ever treated Otheller Heyward like'n to that,” he sizzled vindictively, “ an' he depahted from the town where he lived at mighty soon afterwards. You take my advice, Mistuh Isaac Gethers, an' keep on the lee side of Otheller Heyward when he is in smellin' distance of you.”

Otheller was distinctly out of tune with the finite when he emerged from the Penny Prudential Bank Building into the seethe of Eighteenth Street. He made his way southward and strolled quite as a matter of course into Bud Peaglar's place, where under the soothing influence of clicking pool balls he dropped into a chair and reflected upon his pool triumphs of the previous night and the staggering rebuff of the immediate past.

Three tables were working merrily. The others were engaged in collecting dust. Otheller seated himself in a corner which afforded him a better view than the position he had first chosen, and watched with languid contempt the clumsy efforts of the would-be players.

A long, gangling individual who walked with a decided list to starboard shambled across the room and dropped ostentatiously into a seat beside Otheller. His move was an obvious preliminary to the scraping of an acquaintanceship and through sheer force of habit Otheller produced a welcoming smile. The lanky one spoke:

“Ain’t you the man which won all the money in that Kelly-pool game las’ night?”

“I is.”

“Stranger heah?”

“Yaas — fo’ the presint.”

“Countin’ on remainin’ in Bummin’ham a while?”

“Mebbe.”

“Where you gwine wuk at?”

Otheller looked up quickly. Since his interview with Isaac Gethers the subject of work had become painful and personal.

“Ain’t quite suah.”

“Lookin’ fo’ wuk?”

“Depends.”

The long one hesitated, then extended a moist

bony palm. "My name is Peaglar; Mistuh Bud Peaglar, which owns this heah place."

Otheller turned loose a look which had in it just the correct degree of interest.

"I is Otheller Heyward an' I comes from Meridium, Mississippi."

"Been heah long?"

"On'y come in on the Queen an' Criscint las' night."

Bud lowered his voice discreetly:

"Is you as good a shot as you was showin' las' night or was you luckin' 'em in?"

Otheller laughed proudly.

"Does you shoot yo' ownse'f?"

"I does."

"Git you a cue then, an' try me."

Bud Peaglar got him a cue and tried. And that is about all he succeeded in doing. Otheller handled his stick with the skill and assurance which a mother shows with her ninth child. He drew his cue ball in circles and played position to the fraction of an inch. He deliberately sewed himself up once or twice and then cleared the table just to show what he could do. He suggested French pool and clicked a hundred and ten points to the even ten of his pop-eyed opponent. Then he tossed his cue back into the rack.

"I ain't feelin' so good today," said Otheller Heyward. "I is shootin' a plumb rotten game."

Bud was astounded. Mentally he made obeisance to this prodigy of pool. Within fifteen minutes a deal had been negotiated by which Otheller was employed as house man for the pool room on a basis of five dollars a week guaranty, protection against loss on side bets and a fifty-fifty split on his winnings. "'Co'se five dollars ain't much," explained Bud, "but the house'll stan' fo' yo' losin's."

"Ain't gwine be no losin's."

With this job in view Otheller had perked up. It was just the sort of position best suited to his happy-go-lucky temperament; a little leisurely and pleasurable work when it happened to suit his fancy and enough money to satisfy hunger pangs and pay room rent in a tony boarding house. The men cemented their friendship in the smoke of Turkish cigarettes.

"I was mad when I come in heah," explained Otheller.

"I noticed you di'n't look so awful happy, Brother Heyward."

"I wa'n't. I had jes' came from meetin' with Isaac Gethers." And Otheller proceeded to tell most of what had transpired in the office of the Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise. Bud started chuckling when he was only half through the tale of woe and at its conclusion the pool-room proprietor was laughing aloud.

“ Sho’ now, Brother Heyward, you ain’t got no call goin’ an’ gittin’ sore with Brother Gethers. Mos’ prob’ly if’n he was to run acrost you again in a halft hour he’d ’pologize fo’ what he done said.”

“ An’ I’d mos’ li’ble bust him one. It was all I could do to keep my han’s off’n him when I was in his office, Brother Peaglar. I is a gen’leman, I is, an’ a high-class prelitical expert, an’ when a fat ol’ fool like’n what he is treats me like what he done they ain’t no ’scuse ——”

“ Yes, they is.”

“ Which? ”

“ Isaac Gethers is the marriedes’ man what they is in Bummin’ham, Brother Heyward. Chances is a hund’ed to one that him an’ Christeen, which is his wife, had a turrible row this mawnin’, an’ when they does Isaac don’ git in no good humour ontill he has done et somebody up.”

“ He et me up an’ he’s gwine have indumgestion, too.”

“ He’s a good spoht, Brother Heyward ——”

Brother Heyward was not keenly interested in the sportsmanship of Isaac Gethers. All Otheller knew was that Isaac had grabbed his angora and eloped with it. He had one feeling toward the potentate and that was aversion coupled with a passionate desire to put one over on Mistuh Gethers and let Mistuh Gethers know all about it. Such a reception was an unpleasant novelty to Otheller;

it rankled — rankled not a whit less because he was given to understand that a shrewish wife was the cause of the ill humour.

“ I ain’t ma’ied to this heah Christeen ’ooman, is I? Then why I sh’d suffer ‘cause’n she gits rarin’? ”

But once started on the subject of the domestic discord in the Gethers home Bud Peaglar would not cease talking. For a half hour Otheller was regaled with a chronicle of Isaac’s domestic troubles.

According to Bud’s version Christeen had been a coy and workful maiden. Then she had married Isaac and tasted the sweets of money; for Isaac was accounted one of the wealthiest negroes in the city. Wherewith she had become uppity with her friends, and when that ceased to provide keen sport she had extended her personal domination to her fat and docile spouse.

In Isaac she found a ready and spineless victim. At first symptoms of domestic trouble he had remonstrated mildly, been profoundly squelched and retired permanently into the list of the utterly subdued. The joy of running her own home in her own way promptly went to Christeen’s head; it became a habit, as liquor is a habit. Her system required it. She was blissful in the constant exercise of her power; happy in direct ratio to the abject misery of her never-could-have-been lord and master.

The only fly in the ointment of Christeen's ineffable beatitude, explained Bud, was Isaac's supremacy in the commercial world.

"He's been 'Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise for sech a long time it has become a habit. Reckon they ain't nobody gwine secede him until he goes an' dies. Tha's the trouble; seein' Christeen is a member of the lodge too. They ain't nothin' in the world c'n make her as mad as to see Isaac presidin' over a meetin'— an' believe me, Brother Heyward, when Brother Gethers presides he jes' nacherally presides. I reckon he's the mos' presidines' potentate which the lodge ever had. Tother day to a meetin' somebody had the flo' an' Sis' Christeen gits up an' int'ructs. Isaac says she's out of order, but she keeps on talkin'. He fines her fifty cents. That don' stop her. He fines her eight bits. 'Don' care how much you fines me,' she bellers, 'you is the one gwine pay it yo' ownse'f!' Brother Gethers says then that he's gwine keep on finin' her s'long's she's out of order, he don't care who pays it, an' she quits. He sho' nuff is some presidin' man is what I'm tootin'."

Bud was a profuse talker. He rambled on interminably, recalling anecdote after anecdote having to do with the connubial troubles of the Getherses.

"An' if 'twa'n't fo' the fac' that Brother Gethers is potentate of the lodge I reckon he'd go an' blow

away from misery. Tha's all what keeps him alive in his home, Christeen makes things so hot fo' him. If'n any one sh'd ever beat him fo' that poten'cy — well ——” And Bud flapped his arm in illustration of an angel in full flight.

Up to that point Otheller had been a rather languid listener. Now he looked up suddenly, the purpose of wreaking revenge on Isaac uppermost in his mind.

“ Reckon so? ”

“ Reckon so which? ”

“ That if he'd git hisse'f beat fo' the poten'cy he'd be mis'able? ”

“ Huh! A co'pse which has jes' been hanged would be happy 'longside of what he'd be, come that.”

Otheller lost himself in thought. And finally he expanded into a grin of sincere pleasure.

“ Ol' Isaac Gethers,” he told himself, “ I is got you now where you is sho' gwine be sorry you ain't showed the proper respect to Brother Otheller Heyward! ”

Otheller's tenure of office as house man for Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlour opened auspiciously that night and continued brilliantly on the nights that followed. Meanwhile Otheller was busy on the outside.

His first move in the campaign against Isaac Gethers was to have his membership in The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise transferred from

Meridian Chapter Number Twenty-nine to Birmingham Chapter Number Twelve. Then he deliberately and with malice aforethought set out to cultivate the friendship and trust of Mrs. Christeen Gethers. The task was not a difficult one. Overtures of friendship had become such a rarity to Mrs. Gethers that she responded voluminously.

Otheller was impressed by the gaudy elegance of Isaac's wife. He was frankly in awe of her while in the process of thawing the ice. She was, as Otheller described her, "skinny as a ol' crane," and as peacefully inclined as a pit bull. In her eyes there occasionally flashed a light which aroused in the breast of Otheller a feeling of sympathy for the weak and fatty Isaac.

Otheller trotted out his best little tricks of fascination for Christeen. The full wealth of his personality was exerted to charm her; compelling friendliness was injected into every smile he bestowed upon her. He let her understand clearly that he regarded her as a woman infinitely above the level of those with whom she was forced to associate.

Christeen swallowed hook, line and sinker. She revelled in the fear she was able to inspire in the breasts of the men and women with whom she came in daily contact, but was yet woman enough to respond to the frankly personal appeal of Otheller.

But he was playing his game from both ends. He had elected her a second member of a mutual

admiration society and saw to it that he was not the sufferer in exchanging compliments. Coincidentally with his inspiring her trust in and friendship for him he let it be clearly understood that he regarded himself in every way her equal. He hypnotized her with honeyed words having to do with his own achievements. He was a travelled man and a learned one. He bluffed elegantly. She came eventually to regard him as an oracle. And then when he had her completely at his mercy he sprang his cherished scheme.

It was at the First African M. E. Church immediately following Wednesday night prayer meeting. Isaac was in the lobby fussily arguing a biblical point with the Rev. Plato Tubb and two bewildered deacons. Christeen and Otheller were seated on the steps leading to the choir loft. Otheller was smiling all over.

“ Seems like you is a ve’y modes’, retirin’ woman, Mis’ Gethers. ’Specially when you has all the ’bility what you is got.”

She flushed lavender with pleasure.

“ You is a flatt’rin’ man, Brother Heyward.”

“ I is a strong b’liever in woman’s rights, sister, an’ it soht of hu’ts my feelin’s to see that you ain’t nothin’ on’y a plain member of this heah lodge while yo’ husban’ is Gran’ Magnificent High Potentate. You knows yo’ ownse’f, Sis’ Christeen, that you is got a heap mo’ gumption than what Brother Gethers is got.”

"Ain't it the truth, Brother Heyward?"

"Ain't it, Sis' Christeen? How come yo' husband' gits re'lected so much?"

She sniffed disdainfully "'Cause'n he's uppity and with his heap of money these folks heahabouts is bluffed. He ain't got no mo' call bein' potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise than what — than what — I has."

Otheller's forehead corrugated in thought. The smile fled from his lips. When he met her gaze he was impressively serious.

"Why not?" he asked cryptically.

"Why not which?"

"Why don' you have yo'se'f 'lected Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of the lodge?"

Christeen laughed weakly. "You is on'y makin' talk with yo' mouth, Brother Heyward."

"How come you think thataway?"

"Ain't no woman ever been 'lected to the potent'cy. They always 'lects a woman fust 'sistant to the Gran' Magnificent High Potentate, but never to ——"

"Ain't no law which says a woman cain't be potentate, is they?"

"No-o! But ——"

"Tha's the trouble with you wimmin," railed Otheller in sudden passion. "You goes an' lets the men folks — like Isaac Gethers, f'r instunce — go an' run things they own way. Now me, I is a b'liever in woman's rights an' I b'lieves they can

run things better'n what the men c'n if'n they gits the chance an' takes the right advice from the right feller. An' I'm sayin' right heah an' now that if'n I was a woman like what you is an' had the brains what you is got I'd go an' 'lect myse'f Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will arise."

Christeen was staring at him with wide eyes. "You — you ain't really truly se'ious?"

"I ain't never been so se'ious befo' in my whole life."

She stared raptly upon him and saw that he was indeed serious. Fortunately she could not see the laughter in his soul, or know that there was little of altruism in his revolutionary project.

Wherefore she looked for the first time at the proposition soberly. Its potentialities startled her. Her husband's incumbency of office had been a thorn in her wifely flesh; it had been the insurmountable barrier between herself and genuine, unalloyed happiness. She begrudged him all distinction; not that she loved him less, but herself more. Even his defeat at the hands of another man would have helped, though it would have detracted somewhat from the glory of the Gethers' name. But the prospect of herself usurping his proud position seemed entirely too good to be true and she told Otheller so.

Otheller talked rapidly, softly and convincingly. As a spellbinder he was a past master. He ex-

plained that as a political expert he had made it his business to investigate closely the sentiment of the lodge and discovered that, though Isaac controlled a healthy majority as against a male candidate, his entire scheme would be wrecked by the presence of a woman in the field. The women, Otheller contended, would be fascinated by the novelty of the thing and would rally solidly behind the banner of sex, which fact would insure victory, as they were numerically more than twenty per cent stronger than the men.

Christeen was enthralled. Within five minutes she fell victim to his arguments. The prospect of herself triumphant over Isaac in a lodge election was too roseate for words. Once victory was achieved she knew that he would be effectively and permanently reduced to a condition of innocuous desuetude, his last claim to recognition in the home as a human being destroyed. For the first time in years Christeen envisioned heavenly bliss. Absolute domination of Isaac was a passion now in prospect of fulfilment.

At that she was fearful of Otheller's scheme; it was almost too revolutionary for her iron pioneering hand. His arguments were answer-proof, but she was afraid.

"I ain't know a thing bouten lodge politics, Brother Heyward."

"I does, Sis' Christeen. Politics of all sohts is my preffession, you might say. I was wunst a 'ficial

to a Republican presidential convention up to Chicago. Tha's me. An' if'n I was to handle yo' campaign fo' you — jes' givin' my advice of co'se so they wouldn't nobody know I had a han' in it — they ain't a doubt on earth you would be 'lected over yo' husban'."

They stared at one another, unanimously delighted that the success of their plan spelled abject misery for Isaac Gethers. Otheller started talking; he explained that the election was four weeks distant and that during that month Christeen was to campaign discreetly, letting it be known among her friends that she would be a candidate, but reserving the full force of the bombshell until the night of the meeting.

"'Co'din' to the rules of precedence in the lodge," he explained, "nominations an' 'lections comes the same night an' a candidate is got to be presint or he cain't be no candidate. Now you is gwine be they an' chances is Isaac will have a man runnin' 'gainst him. An' jes' as they is bouten to close the nominations you is got to have a lady frien' there to nominate you an' another one to second the motion. Tha's gwine knock the men folks offen they feet an' all the wimmin is gwine vote fo' you while the men's vote is splittin' two ways an' you is gwine walk in to the poten'cy."

Christeen was happy but doubtful, like a bride about to cook her first dinner. She was afraid that something might go wrong with the plan and fear-

ful of consequences should that be the case. For should she run against her husband and be defeated by him there was grave danger that the wine of victory would mount to his head and he would demand authority in his own home. Christeen realized this, craving the power of the potentacy but dreading defeat. She was frank with Otheller and Otheller smiled away her fears.

He had been inspired solely by a desire to revenge himself upon Isaac Gethers. A new aspect had now presented itself and he warmed to the prospect of easy money; wherefore he expanded upon his prowess as a political expert. He could direct — in strictly sub-rosa fashion, of course — Christeen's campaign and thus insure her election; but, of course, as Sis' Christeen must understand, such an undertaking took time, and time to such a man as Otheller —

Christeen took her cue prettily.

"Co'se, Brother Heyward, I is gwine pay you what it's wuth."

He shook his head.

"I cain't take no money from no lady, Sis' Christeen."

"Shucks! Ain't it fo' professional se'vices?"

"It shuah is."

"An' if'n you was a doctor or a lawyer an' I come to you, woul'n't I pay you?"

"I hope so; I shuah hope so, Sis' Christeen."

"Then why I cain't pay you, say twen'y-five dol-

lars now an' twen'y-five dollars when you gits me 'lected? Previdin' that'll be 'nough."

Otheller assured her that the suggested fee was adequate and on the spot she slipped him two ten-dollar bills and a single five and the contract became operative. They parted happily — Otheller was particularly happy. He would have been fairly joyous at the prospect of his rapidly germinating revenge. But to be paid for it was trebly fine.

The following morning Christeen timidly started her campaign and reported a startled but enthusiastic reception. Otheller foresaw a landslide. And so for several days they went their ways, Christeen gaining confidence and Otheller throwing himself heart and soul into plans for the complete humbling of his *bête noire*.

And then he met Ethline Rollerson!

He met her at the third annual dance of the Junior Beautifying Society. He gazed in awe at her rich brown complexion, her Junoesque figure, the stylish cut of her clothes, the masses of straight hair coifed artistically on her shapely head — he gazed upon a beautiful and a delectable woman and he fell.

It was Otheller's maiden experience with the little blind god and it was a sudden one. One jolt and he was left gasping for air. Women had played an indifferent part in his life; not that he was inclined to misogyny, but he regarded them as

a means rather than an end; and also he fancied himself too good for the average damsel. And so he had met them, charmed them, brought them to the point of believing him a superman — and parted without ill feeling on either hand.

With Ethline all was different. He did not know what there was about her which was radiantly different from other women, but he sensed the difference. He knew instantly that she was the one woman in all creation with whom he was willing — anxious even — to tackle the matrimonial lottery.

Near the divine Ethline stood a tall, broad-shouldered, intensely athletic individual whom Otheller knew casually. They had met informally several nights before over the green of Bud Peaglar's best pool table. Otheller racked his brain, managed to remember the man's name and strode promptly across the room. Otheller was a firm advocate of the do-it-now policy.

"Ain't you Mistuh Jerry Skillet?"

The powerful gentleman admitted the accusation.

"I is."

"I is Otheller Heyward. I b'lieves I an' you played some star pool down to Bud Peaglar's the other night."

Jerry Skillet grimaced and grinned.

"You did, you mean. Me, I di'n't do nothin' on'y look on an' pay fo' the games."

Otheller grinned.

"I was jes' streakin' my good luck, Brother Skillet. Things was breakin' my way."

"They was, an' that ain't no lie."

The men chatted affably about things in general. Jerry found himself irresistibly attracted to the easy-mannered handsome stranger.

Within five minutes he was positive that Otheller was quite the finest man he had ever met.

And when Otheller saw that he had his quarry mesmerized he designated Ethline and fired a question:

"See that pretty gal standin' yonder?"

"Yaas."

"Know her?"

"Soht of."

"What her name is?"

"Ethline Rollerson."

Otheller cleared his throat.

"How 'bout 'traducin' me to her?"

Jerry Skillet drew his friend to the girl's presence.

"Miss Rollerson," he said grandly, "permit me to 'traduce my ve'y good frien', Mistuh Otheller Heyward, of Meridium. Mistuh Heyward, this heah is my fiansay, Miss Ethline Rollerson."

Otheller paused with his hand half extended. His eyes popped open and his jaw dropped. He gulped, moistened his lips, strove to control himself and inserted a fishy paw into Miss Rollerson's firm warm grasp.

“Yo’—yo’ fiansay, Mistuh Skillet? Did I on’er-stan’ you to remark thataways?”

Jerry grinned proudly.

“You sho’ did, Brother Heyward. Me’n Miss Rollerson is engage’ to be ma’ied.”

Otheller kept silent for a minute, and then, just because he felt that it was incumbent upon him to make some sort of a remark, he asked:

“Soon?”

Miss Rollerson answered the question, rolling her eyes coquettishly. It was patent that she was pleased with the stranger.

“I an’ Jerry ain’t makin’ no ma’iage talk yet, Mistuh Heyward. We is on’y jes’ engage’.”

Once he had recovered from the initial shock the fact of a marriage engagement between Ethline Rollerson and Jerry Skillet had comparatively little effect upon Otheller. He made a dead set for her during the rest of the evening and flattered her continuously and outrageously. Not once was he farther than ten feet away, save when she was dancing with another partner.

He recovered his poise and brought the full power of his never-failing hypnotic personality into play. He exerted himself as he had never done before. Beside him Jerry Skillet faded into a pale colourless oblivion. Ethline was frankly fascinated by this cosmopolitan, honey-tongued stranger; wherefore she gave him permission to call upon her the following evening.

“Shuah Jerry ain’t got no objections?”

She tossed her head. “I ain’t worryin’ over Jerry’s ’jections.”

“He might ——”

“An’ then again he mightn’t. He ain’t got no time sayin’ what I is gwine do an’ what I ain’t. I an’ him ain’t on’y engage’.”

Jerry’s friendly feeling toward Otheller did not lessen when he learned from Ethline that the stranger was to call upon her the following evening.

“I tol’ him it’d be all right,” said Ethline.

“Sho’ nuff it is,” concurred Jerry. “He’s a pow’ful nice feller, Brother Heyward is. An’ Ethline, you’d oughter see him shoot pool!”

Otheller sat up very late that night trying to write a lyric poem. He proceeded as far as:

Ethline I shure like you fine
and for you I pine
lik stars in heven yure eyes do shine
Since I met you I’ve jus been sine—

and gave it up as a bad job. There seemed an insufficiency of words which rhymed with Ethline. He destroyed his verse and climbed into bed, where he lay building air castles which were Jerry-Skilletless.

He was sleeping soundly and noisily when his ample landlady rapped sharply on the door. He bade her enter.

“Gen’leman to see you, Mistuh Heyward.”

“Who — me?”

“Yeh.”

“What his name is?”

“Isaac Gethers,” came the answer in a tone which indicated the full measure of respect which the landlady accorded the Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise.

Otheller sat up straight in bed, all thought of Ethline banished on the instant.

Of all persons in the world he least expected Isaac Gethers as a caller, never pausing to realize that, though he was plotting darkly against that henpecked and flabby person, Isaac had completely forgotten the little friction which had marred their introduction.

Otheller slipped into a gaudy bathrobe and seated himself in the only easy-chair the room boasted, so that his visitor would be forced to use the other and extremely uncomfortable one. He then bade the landlady usher Mr. Gethers into the room.

Isaac entered. He entered sheepishly, as though fearing detection. He ducked the inquisitive stare of the landlady and perched himself stiffly on the very edge of the other chair, nervously twirling his hat in fat shaky fingers.

The landlady departed reluctantly. Otheller sat quietly — enjoying, though not understanding — the discomfiture of his visitor. Isaac cleared his throat.

“Mistuh Heyward?”

"Tha's me."

"You remembers me?"

"I mos' suttinly an' positively does."

"Shuah?"

"You is the Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, ain't you?"

"I is. You come to my office one day when you fust come to Bummin'ham."

"So I did. I ain't fo'got. What c'n I do fo' you, Mistuh Gethers?"

Isaac hitched his chair confidingly closer. He threw an apprehensive gaze about the room and lowered his voice.

"I jedge that you is to be trusted, Mistuh Heyward."

"You jedges correct."

"I wan's to ast you: that fust day you was in my office, di'n't I on'erstan' you to say that you was a prelitical expert? That you knows all 'bouten 'lections an' things whether they is in the guv'ment or in the lodge?"

"I reckon you on'erstood that same. Such bein' my pfeession."

Isaac heaved a profound sigh.

"Mistuh Heyward, I is in a mos' oxccessive pickle."

With great difficulty Otheller concealed a triumphant grin.

"You ain't say so?"

"Yeh, I does say so. An' what I impaht to you immedijtly heahafter is in strictes' confidence, Mistuh Heyward. I is a mis'able man; a ve'y mis'able man."

"'Count of which?"

"My wife. Christeen, Mistuh Heyward, which I on'erstan' you has met mo'n once, is a woman who is plumb fon' of bein' boss roun' the house. Now I is a peaceable man an' a quiet one, Mistuh Heyward, an' I don' appeal to do no fightin' with my wife, so I is always 'lowed her to have her way. Ontil jes' right recent. Sumthin' has now came up an' risen which has brung me heah to ast yo' professional 'sistance. I reckon you understan's, Brother Heyward, that sometimes a woman c'n go too far."

"Ain't you tootin' now?"

"I is. Is you prepared to listen?"

Otheller leaned forward with genuine interest. His scheme was veering off at a wholly unexpected and delightful tangent.

"Splain it, Brother Gethers."

Brother Gethers explained. He started with his wedding day and traced a history of tearful matrimonial discord down to the previous week, winding up with a tragic recital of a conversation he had had with his wife the night before. In that conversation he had boasted once too often of the pre-eminence which was his by reason of his rulership of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, where-

with his wife had lost her temper and retorted wrathfully that his tenure of office was nearing an end and that she was destined to become his successor.

The supreme misery of Isaac Gethers would have softened any heart less adamant than that of Otheller Heyward. It was plain to him that the election of Christeen would be nothing short of a cataclysm to the persecuted husband.

"If'n 'twas any other woman," wailed Isaac, "it'd be bad enough. But Christeen! Oh! Lawsy! Life ain't gwine be wuth livin'."

Otheller had listened patiently and gleefully. Now he fired a direct question:

"What is I got to do with this?"

Isaac hesitated, but only for a second.

"Ain't you done said you is a prelitical expert?"

"I has."

"An' you really does know a heap 'bouten lodge 'lections 'an' sechlike?"

"Folks what knows says I is the bes' which is."

Isaac extended both hands in a hopeless, helpless gesture, a gesture which was at one time an admission of impotence and a plea for aid.

"Tha's why I come to you, Brother Heyward. I needs yo' help. If'n 'twas on'y that I was gwine git beat 'twouldn't be so bad, but when I thinks of my wife gittin' 'lected — if'n that was to be, Brother Heyward, they jes' wouldn't be no livin' with that woman of mine."

Brother Heyward hypocritically t'chked his sympathy.

"An' you is consultin' me in a professional capacity?"

"You said it."

"You wan's me to negotiate yo' campaign so's you will be re'lected."

"You is shuah singin' the ultimate correct chune."

"Co'se you ain't gwine want nobody to know they is a deal on 'twixt us, is you?"

Isaac hastened to affirm that he did not.

"My price," stated Otheller firmly, "will be sevumty-five dollars."

With speed which brought regrets to the mercenary heart of Otheller, The Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise whipped out his wallet and shoved one twenty and three tens at his vis-à-vis.

"They's fifty in cash, Brother Heyward, an' you gits t'other twent'y-five when I gits re'lected."

Otheller was satisfied but still a trifle sad. He realized too late that he might have doubled his price and got away with it. At that he had already cleared seventy-five dollars on the little political turmoil he had started and was certain of another twenty-five no matter which member of the Gethers family polled the larger vote. As to the ethical aspect of the double and conflicting retainers he entertained absolutely no compunctions.

He was frankly allied with Christeen. He even expressed to Isaac the conviction that the odds were all on the side of his wife. Much to his surprise Isaac disagreed.

"I thinks I c'n beat Christeen, Brother Heyward."

"You does?"

"I is almos' shuah of it."

"Then why'd you come to me?"

"'Cause in a matter of sech wital empo'tance as this, Brother Heyward, a man which takes chances is got a heap of jackass blood in him an' I ain't never been 'cused of that. They's too much 'pendin' on this heah 'lection fo' me to leave one stone tu'ned wrong side over."

Isaac radiated confidence; Otheller probed for the conditions behind the other's optimism.

"Why you think she is gwine git beat? They is mo' wimmin in the lodge than what they is men."

"Tha's true."

"An' ain't they all gwine stan' behin' Christeen cause'n she's a woman?"

"They's where you is wrong, Brother Heyward. You ain't so ve'y freemiliar with my wife, 'countin' if you was you'd know they ain't many wimmin in Bummin'ham which ain't aimin' to t'ar her hair out by the roots fust time they gits a good squar' chancet."

"You ain't say so!"

"I does that ve'y same thin'."

Here was a new and interesting personal angle on the political situation. He felt grateful to Isaac for putting into his hands such invaluable information. He was determined that nothing was to interfere with his pet scheme of ignominiously defeating the present incumbent.

"An' you thinks you will git 'nough wimmin votes to poll a majority?"

"I think so, but I ain't shuah of it. Tha's what yo' sevumty-five dollars is fo'— to make shuah."

Otheller pledged himself to make sure. He intended to make very sure indeed — sure that Isaac lost. He understood Isaac's position perfectly; the man had too much at stake to take a single chance. Otheller admired his political acumen. Isaac was wise enough to recognize the element of the uncertain, the remote possibility that the novelty of the thing might appeal to a woman to the end that Christeen would be elected.

As very confidential adviser to Isaac Gethers, Otheller absorbed considerable valuable information. And as the data shaped themselves under his hand he began to entertain doubts of the success of his scheme. He still contended that Christeen would win, but he was not so positive in his assertion that Isaac would run a poor race. He was quite sure that the situation needed intensive study.

And then he forgot the situation and remem-

bered Ethline Rollerson, or rather he happened to remember Ethline and forgot the lodge. He counted again the twenty and the three tens and sought a florist. Within twenty minutes a dozen pink carnations were en route to the Rollerson home.

That afternoon Otheller shot a very indifferent cue at Bud Peaglar's. He actually experienced a little trouble in defeating the second best player in the city. He pleaded indigestion and got the evening off.

Nor was he able to produce at the dinner table the ability usually marking his gustatory exercises. Three pork chops, a dish of rice, four large biscuits, a cup of coffee and two slices of pie; he finished them with neatness and dispatch and pushed his chair disgustedly away from the table. "I shuah is got it bad," he reflected. "When a man's in love he cain't eat nothin'."

He found Ethline surpassingly radiant and interestingly receptive for one whose heart and hand were already pledged to another and handsomer man. The flowers had done the work. Jerry Skillet was no tightwad but his gifts were usually less perishable than flowers — and woman, be she racially blonde or brunette, responds to a floral appeal.

Ethline responded elegantly. So well that Otheller vaguely contemplated a plunge into the

florist business. He gleaned the hope that there might be slightly more than a minimum of chance for him.

He trod on air all the next day and the one following. The second night after his initial visit he called again by appointment. Jerry was out of the city and Ethline lonesome. Otheller promised to fill in as best he could and made an excellent substitute. Ethline wasn't even conscious of the fact that she missed the departed Jerry.

Otheller intrigued her vastly. He was deference personified. He carried with him an affability and a poise deliciously urban. He was literally polished to his fingertips, intransigently good-natured and frankly out to please. And all the time he was studying her carefully, cataloguing her frailties and her strength. From that pleasant study there was evolved an idea.

It was a Gargantuan idea, a Napoleonic inspiration. It was worthy of a master mind and Otheller's smile fairly scintillated as he fenced for an opening. He was about to offer her the one thing which Jerry Skillet — with all his affluence — could not give; the thing which is to the average human better than much fine gold.

He played cleverly upon her pride of place. He spoke convincingly of his ability to manipulate his fellow men to the end of achieving the seemingly impossible. And when he had her interest boiling

he calmly suggested that she allow him to elect her Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise.

In her candidacy he found the solution of every angle of the puzzling problem which he was facing. During the last two days he had studied the political situation with unusual care. Election night was approaching and interest was heated, thanks to hints which had leaked regarding the prospective candidacy of Christeen Gethers. And from the maze of talk and counter talk Otheller had come to understand that Christeen was a weak sister politically. Women disliked her and would vote against her willy-nilly, preferring anything to her election.

But a woman of Ethline's stamp — there was something vastly different. Ethline was young, beautiful, generally liked — making up in winning personality what she lacked in executive ability. Otheller figured it out that women would rally almost solidly to the Rollerson standard and that they would be re-enforced by every man who nourished a grudge against Isaac.

The scheme appeared flawless as he explained it in glowing terms to Ethline. She responded to his suggestion with an enthusiasm which might have aroused more than a mite of interest in the mind of the absent Jerry Skillet.

But Otheller was no fool; he knew that he was becoming exceedingly involved. He had pledged

himself to operate the campaigns of all three candidates for the potentacy of the lodge. There was solace in the fact that he was bound to win, but danger that his wires would get crossed. Though all three campaigns were to be handled in strictest privacy there was always danger of a slip — and a slip at this time promised to prove embarrassing to the wire-pulling Otheller. Therefore he sagely decided to reduce his danger to a minimum.

He admitted to the entranced Ethline that he was supposed to be running Isaac's campaign. He averred stoutly that Isaac had no chance whatever of winning and that he would be doing the stout potentate a friendly favour by seeing to it that, since Isaac could not be returned victorious, some one other than Christeen should be.

“Co'se,” he explained, “I is gwine make him think he is gwine win the 'lection an' all the time you an' him will be wukin' as allies. An' on'y you an' me is gwine know that I is wukin' things fo' you to win.”

“How that gwine be?”

He shook his head wisely.

“Otheller Heyward c'n fix things which is a heap harder'n that. I is goin' to Isaac an' git him to invite you to run against him, 'countin' he thinks he will split the wimmin vote, beat Christeen an' 'lect him!”

It didn't require any enormous amount of argument to make the worried Isaac see that Ethline's

candidacy was vital to the success of his own race. According to the dictatorial Otheller it was simple as A-B-C. If only Isaac and Christeen made the race, he explained, there was grave danger that the vote would be split by sexes, in which event Christeen would be an easy winner. On the other hand if Isaac could induce Ethline to run it would split the female vote while the masculine ballot would rally solidly behind Isaac.

"Tha'd make Sis' Christeen run thi'd," averred Otheller. "How'd you like that?"

Isaac beamed beatifically.

"Hones'?"

"Couldn't be no other way. If'n the wimmin had they chancet of votin' fo' two wimmin an' yo' wife was one of them you know good an' well she won't have no chancet whatever a-tall 'countin' so many wimmin don't like her."

"That sho' is the truth, Brother Heyward. It sho' is. I reckon you suttinly is got sumthin' on yo' shoulders 'ceptin' on'y a neck."

Isaac parted from Otheller and went surreptitiously to the home of Ethline Rollerson, where, after considerable preamble, he ventured the suggestion that she enter the race for Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise.

Ethline played her rôle excellently. She appeared stunned with surprise, though in her heart she was applauding Otheller's masterly adroitness

in not only forcing Isaac to dance when he pulled the wires, but to be blissfully unconscious that there were any wires.

"Why is you so sot on me runnin', Mistuh Gethers?"

"I is a mis'able man, Miss Rollerson; a ve'y exceedin'ly mis'able man. How come my wife to git this fool idee 'bout runnin' fo' the poten'cy in her haid fust off, I don' know; but it shows me right off that some woman is gwine win the 'lection. Theyfo' I says to myse'f that if'n I ain't gwine win I don't want my wife to win, an' also I says to myse'f, Sis' Ethline, that they ain't no prettier, mo' competenter, capabeller woman to be potentate of the lodge than what you is."

"You is shuah I'll be 'lected if'n I runs?"

"Positively certain," he lied calmly.

"Hones' shuah?"

"They ain't a chancet contrariwise, Sis' Ethline. Ise a seein' man an' I knows when I is beat, so I is gwine tip off all my frien's that they is to make a great, big howdee-do 'bouten me an' then vote fo' you. 'Co'se Christeen ain't gwine know I is got anythin' to do with yo' runnin' an' she ain't gwine be a whole lot worried 'bouten it ontill come 'lection time, when all my vote is goin' yo' way. They ain't no 'jority 'lections in the lodge, you know. No matter how many candidates they is the one which gits the mos' votes gits 'lected."

Ethline was persuadable. She coyly accepted

Isaac's proposition and went so far as to promise that when she was elected she would accord him the place behind the throne. Both were chuckling to themselves as they parted. "That gal," communed Isaac, "is gwine jes' bus' up Christeen's vote an' I is gwine walk in." Said Ethline to herself: "Otheller is some foolin' man. He is got that ol' butterball thinkin' he is gwine win over me."

It was inevitable that news of the double feminine candidacy should leak out. It did. Isaac's first outside intimation came from his wife. That militant person sailed in upon him one evening with eyes blazing with fury. She slammed herself into a wicker chair and emitted a grunt of anger.

"That hussy!"

"Which hussy?"

"Ethline Rollerson!"

"What 'bouten her?"

"She is gwine run fo' Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of the lodge. Tha's what she is gwine do. Think of the gall of her runnin' fo' that office! It's a outrage!"

"'Cause she's a woman, you mean?"

"No — not meanin' nothin' of the kin'. It's a outrage 'cause I is a'ready let 'em know that I is runnin' an' ev'rybody knows good an' well I is the bes' woman in Bummin'ham to be potentate of that lodge."

Isaac perked up hopefully.

"If'n tha's the case, whyn't you withdraw outen the race befo' you gits beat?"

She flared.

"Who says Ise gwine git beat?"

"Ethline is younger an' prettier."

"O-o-ow!" She rose and placed strong hands on narrow hips. "So you is jes' like all these other fools, huh? You is still got yo' eyes on the faces an' figgers of young gals? Well, when I finishes with you ——"

The news became general. It was at first received with open incredulity. It was substantiated and became the topic of the hour. The election was only two weeks distant and for the first time in years the members of the lodge were keyed up to a high pitch of excitement.

Otheller was in his element. He was enjoying himself hugely. He snooped about industriously, picking up morsels of political gossip where he could, quietly campaigning for Ethline and trying his best to get a true line on the situation. Things seemed to be coming his way. More, he arranged secret conference after secret conference between Isaac and Ethline. Nothing of importance was discussed at the conferences, but they were thoroughly enjoyable and kept the rival candidates satisfied. Each was trusting in Otheller and disdainful of the other's credulity. Of course the conferences were strictly private. It would never

do, explained Otheller, to let the others know they were in cahoots.

Otheller himself became the champion conferee in the Birmingham district. He met Christeen in isolated spots and liberally imparted high-sounding and utterly foolish advice. He conversed frequently and profusely with the harassed Isaac and convinced him that his election was assured. But more frequently than all he was with Ethline.

His political conversations with her bordered on the personal. Otheller's sun was shining brightly and he was making an excellent crop of hay.

But it was Bud Peagler who limped in and heaved a bomb into Otheller's political cosmos. Bud was a shrewd observer with a hundred per cent acquaintance among the voters of the lodge. In the rear of Bud's pool emporium one afternoon Otheller heard Bud lay fifty dollars against forty that Isaac Gethers would win, provided no other male candidate entered the field. Much perturbed, Otheller cornered his employer.

"You think Isaac is gwine be re'lected?"

Bud laughed.

"They is a law of the lodge which says a candidate is got to be at the meetin' or he cain't be voted on. If'n Isaac is at that they meetin', Otheller, he's gwine be 'lected sho's hell's a fishpond."

"How come you think that?"

"I ain't on'y think it — I know it!"

"How come?"

"These heah wimmin is gwine split the female vote an' that'll give Isaac a big lead."

"But they is plenty of men which don' like Isaac an' which will vote fo' Sis' Ethline."

"Yeh, an' you is forgotten that they is a heap of wimmin which don' like Christeen cause's she is pow'ful uppity an' hates Ethline cause'n she is young an' one of the pretties' gals which they is in Bummin'ham. An' when wimmin hates other wimmin, Otheller, they is gwine do all which is in they power to keep 'em from gittin' a high presition what the head of the lodge is."

"But," inquired Otheller thoughtfully, "which one of them wimmin would git 'lected if'n Isaac Gethers never showed up to the meetin'?"

"Ethline Rollerson, of co'se."

"Shuah?"

"Positive."

"I mean is you hones' shuah?"

"They ain't even one li'l single chancet otherwise, Ortheller, cause'n Ise tellin' you they ain't never been a woman hated so much like what Christeen is. They ain't nobody likes her an' they neither ain't nobody gwine vote fo' her, 'ceptin' she's the only woman in the race."

The idea was disturbing. Otheller was grimly determined to elect Ethline to the potentacy. He was beginning to suspect that he had read the cards wrong.

Those in close touch with the situation were

unanimous in believing that Isaac could win handily against either or both women. They asserted that under any circumstances he would poll a majority vote. Bud Peaglar was an oracle in such matters and he loved a dollar as the average man loves his life. He had given odds on Isaac. Isaac himself was no fool and he radiated confidence in himself. He knew his own strength and his own weakness; he had shown his wisdom in hiring Otheller to guard against contingencies. But he maintained stoutly that he could defeat both female candidates.

Otheller sought the advice of Florian Slappey, the dapper, dandified secretary of the lodge. He laid the question before Florian. Brother Slappey's verdict came unhesitatingly:

"No matter who runs, Brother Heyward, they ain't gwine be on'y one pusson in the race an' his name is Isaac Gethers. He's gwine git mo' votes than what them two wimmin is gwine poll t'gether."

The following night was a sad and thoughtful one for Otheller. Ethline's election was not only the trump card in his suit for her heart and hand, but the failure of his plan and her defeat would change her idolatry of him to withering scorn. He would then be in the position of having made her a laughingstock in the coloured community; he would have throttled his last chance and opened the road to Jerry Skillet's early matrimonial bliss.

Toward morning an idea seeped into his brain.

It was a good idea. It stuck. Otheller rose, crossed to the mirror of his dresser and addressed his reflection:

“Otheller Heyward,” he orated sternly, “they ain’t on’y one thing fo’ you to do: you is got to git Isaac Gethers outen that race!”

He was particularly appalled by the magnitude of the job he thus calmly bade himself do. Already he was gripped by the preliminary pains of an idea directed toward Isaac’s undoing. It was obvious that Christeen was his key.

Christeen — how could he arouse her to the point of action where she would bodily yank Isaac out of the race? She was skinny, passing ugly and green-eyed. Otheller slapped his thigh, threw back his head and roared with laughter. The completed scheme fairly slapped him in the face. It was a veritable wonder. “They ain’t no pickle a man can’t git out of if’n he’s got brains like what I is got,” he observed to himself.

His whole card was Christeen’s jealousy. Isaac wasn’t much to be jealous of, but such as he was Christeen made the most of him. All well and good; Otheller was the arranger of the many secret conferences between Isaac and Ethline. Therefore Otheller calmly purposed making his adored one the *tertium quid* in arousing the jealous ire of Christeen to the point where she would immediately and forcibly eliminate Isaac as a candidate.

Otheller sat down to think it over. Just one little detail was lacking to make the plan complete. In thinking of jealousy Otheller's mind reverted to the sparks of green he had seen in Jerry's eyes the last few days.

Otheller entertained no ambition to arouse Jerry's ire. He didn't mind marrying Jerry's fiancée, but until he did so he didn't wish that gentleman to suspect that he had any personal designs upon her.

Therefore it appeared to him that somehow Jerry must be injected — as an ally — into the Gethers' débâcle. At first blush such a condition appeared impossible, but Otheller was not one to be stumped by a simple problem in manipulation. He gave himself over to a session of headachy thinking.

He had managed things so well that no one save himself, Isaac and Ethline was aware of the many confabs between the two candidates for the potency of the lodge. Heretofore he had not thought of them as grist for his mill. But now —

He wanted Jerry Skillet as an ally, not as an enemy. Jerry boasted two strong arms and Otheller didn't know when he — Otheller — might need them. Besides he wished to lull Jerry's rousing suspicion that he might entertain toward Ethline a feeling which was not in keeping with the sentiments which an unattached gentleman is commonly supposed to have toward the lady of his friend's choice.

By the following morning his scheme had fully matured. Otheller was quite entranced with it. He hastened to Jerry and smiled away the baleful glare which that young man bestowed upon him. The conversational preliminaries done away with, Otheller got down to brass tacks.

"I is been seein' a heap of Miss Ethline lately," he vouchsafed.

"You ain't tellin' me nothin' I don' know a'ready," snapped Jerry.

"She's a nice gal — pow'ful nice. But foolish."

"How comes, foolish?"

"Jes' so, jes' so. 'Co'se I is on'y int'rested in her 'countin' I is a friend of yourn an' you is gwine make ma'iage with her."

"Thet so?"

"Absotively."

"I is been wond'rin' lately ——"

"Wond'rin' ain't never he'ped no man. You is been misundumstandin' things, Jerry Skillet, an' I is 'shame' of you. You is been thinkin' they was sumthin' 'twix' I an' Ethline, wa'nt you?"

Jerry gazed upon his beaming friend and shook his head in shamefaced negation.

"Not 'zac'ly."

"I is been tryin' to he'p you, Jerry Skillet, an' now I is came to you as a frien' an' adviser both."

"Bouten which?"

Whereupon Otheller pulled out all stops and plunged into the little matter of Ethline's candi-

dacy for Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise. He averred that Ethline was certain of election.

“An’ you knows yo’ ownself, Jerry Skillet, that if’n any woman is ’lected to a office like what that is it’s boun’ to go to her haid an’ she won’t be fitten fo’ no se’f-respectin’ man to live with. You ain’t on’y got to look at Isaac an’ Christeen Gethers. A’ready Christeen is makin’ Isaac’s life so mis’able that it’s even wuss’n it’s ever been befo’ and’ jes’ countin’ she thinks she is gwine be ’lected — which she ain’t.”

“Tha’s so, Brother Heyward; tha’s plumb so. But I ain’t been so wo’ied bouten Ethline ’cause I thought she was gwine git beat.”

Otheller nodded sympathetic understanding of Jerry’s colossal ignorance. “Tha’s cause’n you ain’t no prelitical expert like what I is, Brother Skillet. If’n you was you’d see right off quick that they ain’t nobody got a chancet to be ’lected ’ceptin’ on’y Ethline. She’s plumb certain to git the mos’ votes less’n they’s some expert prelitical work done to keep her from it.”

“How c’n that be done?”

Otheller opened his lips, then closed them. He shook his head hopelessly.

“Tha’s sumthin’ which cain’t be ’splained, Brother Skillet. Politics is got to be bohn in a man like what it was in me. But sumthin’ oughter be done. Tha’s shuah. If’n ’tain’t, Ethline is

gwine be 'lected an' it's goin' to her haid an' then you ain't gwine be so ve'y glad that you ma'ied her."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"It sho' is. I wisht I could give you the right advice — on'y it's one of them things which has to be did an' cain't be talked."

"Mebbe she is gwine be 'lected 'gainst all anybody c'n do."

"No. They ain't no candidate cain't be 'feated if'n she is handled right. It's a pity you ain't a expert like what I is, 'cause'n if you was you could 'ten' to it."

Jerry cogitated intensively.

"Tha's yo' professional business, ain't it, Otheller?"

"What?"

"Politics."

"It shuah is."

"Then," inspirationally, "why cain't I 'ploy you professionally to see that Ethline gits defeated in the 'lection? Co'se she ain't never to know I is doin' it an' they ain't nobody else to know."

Otheller appeared to think.

"That ain't sech a bad idee, Jerry. I'd do it fo' you fo' nothin' on'y a long time ago I swore a swear that I always would cha'ge a fee fo' my se'vices. But if'n twen'y-five dollars ——"

The money was paid on the spot, and the contract closed. Otheller parted from the gullible Jerry Skillet in an exalted frame of mind. He had not

only collected twenty-five dollars of his money and brought his total cash-in-hand earnings on the political mixup he had started to one hundred dollars even, but he had made it possible to spend considerable of his time in the company of Ethline Rollerson without arousing Jerry's suspicion. He was not one whit less determined to elect Ethline, but he could now go ahead freely and count on Jerry as a blind ally.

"They say they is one bohn ev'ry minute," reflected Otheller. "If'n tha's the case Jerry must of been intended to be twins."

Immediately following his remunerative conversation with Jerry, Otheller made his way to the Gethers homestead, where he found Mrs. Gethers engaged over several pairs of ex-socks. She bade him be seated and inquired the object of his visit.

Otheller was portentously secretive. He appeared to be bursting with the importance of his tidings. And then, when he had the fiery spouse of the flabby potentate worked up to a fever pitch, he spoke softly but convincingly of an infatuation which had but recently developed between her husband and the fair Ethline Rollerson.

At first she was sceptical. "Huh! A good-lookin' gal like Ethline ain't got no time fo' a fat no-'count like what Isaac is."

"Ain't no use conversationin' 'bout why she is runnin' with him, Sis' Christeen. Fac' is they is together constant an' I knows it."

"How you know it?"

"I sees 'em together frequent, mos'ly at her house. Is you been knowin' that?"

"No-o!"

"An' 'sides, if'n that ain't 'nough to convince you, mebbe this will: Did you know that it was yo' ve'y own husban', Isaac Gethers, which got Ethline to enter the lodge race jes' so's you'd be beat?"

Christeen rose. She rose suddenly and heatedly. She demanded proof, which Otheller blandly furnished. Then she raved. He gave her free rein for fifteen minutes, encouraging her when she faltered in denouncing her consort. He was chuckling quietly over what was going to happen in the Gethers household in the very near future, with Isaac as the happenee. Truly the revenge he was wreaking against the once discourteous official was a dire one and the best part of the situation was that Isaac was paying for it. It was soothing to Otheller's artistic sense; a case of politics on the highest possible plane.

But he had not yet played all of his good cards. He waited until the first storm had toned down and fired the inevitable question:

"What you want me to do, Sis' Christeen?"

"Huh! 'Tain't no question of what is you to do — it's what is I to do?"

"Tha's the truth."

"What is you got to siggest?"

“ Make him stop cuttin’ fumadiddles with Ethline.”

“ How I c’n do that, Brother Heyward? ”

“ Tell Jerry Skillet bouten wha’s goin’ on. Him bein’ Ethline’s fiansay he’ll mos’ prob’ly ’ten’ to it.”

That afternoon Mrs. Christeen Gethers told the tale to Jerry Skillet with such embellishments as occurred to her heated mind. Jerry came frothing to Otheller with news of the perfidy of his fiancée. Otheller attempted to soothe him.

“ Co’s’e I is been suspectin’ same fo’ the longes’ time,” he admitted. “ Leastaways I is been thinkin’ I was suspectin’ it. But they wa’n’t no use tellin’ you. ’Twoul’n’t do nothin’ on’y make you mis’able.”

“ Otheller, when a man’s ve’ry own fiansay is runnin’ roun’ with another man, ain’t he got a right to be mis’able? ”

“ You ain’t know she is.”

“ Christeen says —— ”

“ Christeen uses her mouth a whole heap to make talk with. Now my advice to you, Brother Skillet, is to keep yo’ shirt on. My idee is that Brother Gethers is gwine git beat in the ’lection an’ Ethline is gwine git beat too also. An’ when Ethline gits beat she ain’t gwine have nothin’ mo’ to do with Isaac, ’countin’ she’ll be sore at him cause’n he got her into the race.”

“ Nothin’ mo’ ain’t he’pin’ now, is it? ”

Otheller was enjoying himself. Jerry was rising

avidly to the bait and Otheller had rose-pink visions of a consuming jealousy which would result in the jilting of Ethline by her lover. The fact that he was placing her in a rather questionable light did not bother him materially. He was far more vitally concerned with the end than with the means.

There were two courses open to him: one the crude inflaming of Jerry's jealousy with immediate action; the other — the far more artistic plan — of storing Jerry's wrath until the night of the election and then drafting it to keep Isaac away from the meeting in case Christeen's jealousy did not do the work.

And it didn't. During the following ten days Isaac wore an exceedingly woebegone and bedraggled expression which hinted broadly of domestic discord of the practical type, but there was too much at stake for even a henpecked husband to capitulate, and he was fighting his hearthstone battles with greater spirit than he had exhibited since the days of his honeymoon. Christeen admitted to Otheller that she couldn't understand Isaac. He refused to be subdued entirely. The best she was able to do was terrorize him, and that was poor satisfaction. Otheller commiserated with her and drew golden pictures of her bliss when she should be returned winner in the lodge over her husband and the woman of whom she was so insanely jealous.

He experienced greater difficulty in handling

Jerry Skillet. Jerry was on the warpath, yelling for blood and lots of it. He wanted to wrap his strong fingers round the windpipe of the perfidious Isaac and squeeze — squeeze hard.

Nothing would normally have pleased Otheller better, but, though not objecting to the *modus operandi* proposed by Jerry, he was most particular as to time and place. The closer the election the more certain Otheller became that the very presence of Isaac in the hall spelled victory for that gentleman and disaster for Otheller's pet schemes. Otheller could not think of a more bitter dose than the election of Isaac Gethers.

True an additional twenty-five dollars would be due from Isaac should he be the successful candidate, but on the other hand Otheller knew that by Isaac's victory he would irrevocably lose out with the delectable Ethline and incur the everlasting enmity of Christeen — two possibilities with potentialities not to be sneezed aside. In addition to that the most glorious portion of his elaborate plotting would have fallen flat.

Otheller insisted that Jerry might possibly be in a fair way to ruin his own chances for matrimonial bliss by flying off at a tangent and giving a too-ready ear to wild rumours. Of course he admitted his belief that all was not as it should be between Isaac and Ethline.

“But a ounce of bein' shuah, Brother Skillet, is wuth a poun' an' a halft of bein' sorry.”

Things looked black for the crisscross schemes of the imported spellbinder when the day of election dawned. Late the previous night when the pool business had lulled for the moment he had adroitly questioned Florian Slappey and Bud Peaglar, the political mentors of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise. They agreed that Isaac would have a walkaway, whether both women ran or only one. Christeen's fatal weakness, they contended, was her disagreeable disposition and highfalutin' airs; Ethline's lack of strength, her youth and lack of executive experience. Though they were sure that the women voters would not stand together, they were equally positive that the men would, when opposed by a crusader of the opposite sex.

"S'posin' they wa'nt on'y Christeen an' Ethline at the meetin'? S'posin' Isaac never showed up?"

"S'posin' somebody give me a pair of dice which woul'n't on'y shoot sevens an' 'levens?"

"Ise se'ious."

"You sounds plumb jokin'. But if'n Isaac wa'n't there I reckon Ethline would win fo' to one."

A studious survey of the last-minute situation convinced Otheller that these men had the true dope. Obviously it was up to him to keep Isaac Gethers away from the meeting, for, according to the by-laws of the lodge, no member was eligible to be voted upon for office unless present in person.

Otheller pasted an expression of utter lugubriosity upon his face and made his way to the place where Jerry Skillet worked.

"Brother Skillet," he began cheerlessly, "I is got two pieces of bad news fo' you."

"Huh?"

"Sho' nuff. Fust off, I now b'lieves that yo' sispicions regahdin' Isaac Gethers an' yo' gal is true."

"An'—an' what else?" choked Jerry wrathfully.

"T'other piece of news is — I c'n prove it!"

Jerry clapped a perspiring hand to his forehead.

"An' that bein' the case, Brother Skillet, an' me bein' a frien' of your'n, I ain't no man to stan' in the way of a fiansay which has been treated like what you has from wreakin' his full revenge. I jes' wan's you to promise me one thing, Brother Skillet — on'y jes' one thing."

"Yeh! yeh! What might that be?"

"I is got proof fo' you that yo' fiansay is traipsin' roun' with Isaac Gethers, but I ain't want you to beat him up until you git said proof with yo' own eyes."

Jerry promised. He wanted proof, yet he feared it.

"'Twoul'n't be so bad if'n 'twas a reg'lar man," he wailed. "But a ol' moo-cow monkey like Isaac Gethers — Oh! Lawsy! Otheller, you don't know how awful it is!"

Otheller maintained that he did. "An' the proof which I is got is this, Brother Skillet: You know the alley which the lodge rooms of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise stan's on the corner of it?"

"Yeh, shuah I knows it."

"An' you know that the 'lection meetin' is gwine be at eight-thutty t'night?"

"Yeh."

"Does you also know on t'other end of that alley which the lodge rooms is on the corner of they is a vacant house which is owned by Brother Semore Mashby?"

"The house what Brother November Spurling went an' died in?"

"Tha's the ve'y same house what I designates.

"Well, t'night 'twix' sev'n-fo'ty an' eight o'clock Ethline Rollerson an' Isaac Gethers is gwine meet in that house—— Now wait a minute; don' you go skally-hootin' off like that. Lis'en to me out an' then decide what you is gwine do; decide it sober an' quiet. An' you don' know but what mebbe I is wrong. They is some better men'n me which has been wrong once in they lives.

"That alley which Brother Spurling useter live on, an' which his house is still on it, is a long dark alley 'thout no lights. I reckon that is jes' bouten the longes' an' darkes' alley which they is in Bummin'ham. Now I ain't sayin' what Sis' Ethline and Brother Gethers is meetin' they fo'— an' mebbe

come they ain't gwine meet a-tall. But I'd siggest that you posts yo'se'f in the alley near to that house t'night 'bouten sevum-thutty or there'bouts an' wait. If'n I is right you is gwine see Sis' Ethline an' Brother Gethers sneak in they at diffe'ent times. An' under such succumstances, if'n I was you an' 'gage' to Ethline I'd jes' nacherally wait in that dahk alley until they come out an' stahded fo' the meetin' an' then I'd step up an' sqush Brother Gethers in the jaw; one time right in the jaw — an' hahd. I reckon it'd come might' nigh bein' a lesson to him.

“An' case'n you wan's to know why I sigges's a dahk alley, Brother Skillet, it's 'cause'n you is gwine marry Sis' Ethline an' you don' want no scandal 'tached to her name. An' if'n you busted Brother Gethers in public ev'ybody would know it an' fin' out why you done same.

“Now after you is slammed him a good one, why all you got to do is jes' to quiet Ethline up — she's gwine be bellerin', an', knowin' wimmin' like I do, I know she's gwine be plumb sorry you foun' her out — an' bring her straight down to the lodge meetin'. Then when they fin's Brother Gethers lyin' up in the alley they ain't gwine sispec' you was mixed up in them injerries which he is goin' to got. On'erstan'?”

“Yeh — yeh, but wha's that 'bouten me bringin' Ethline to the meetin'? Mebbe she's gwine git 'lected if'n I do.”

Otheller threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

“G’wan, Brother Skillet, you is jes’ makin’ a whole passel of foolish talk. When you reemahks ’bouten Sis’ Ethline gittin’ ’lected you is showin’ you ain’t got good sense. I is got things fixed up suchwise that Sis’ Christeen will git ten votes to ev’y one which comes Sis’ Ethline’s way. An’ b’lieve me, bein’ an expert like what I is, I knows jes’ zac’ly what I is talkin’ ’bout. An’ that bein’ the case, Brother Skillet, you know well as me they coul’n’t be no better lesson fo’ the woman which you is gwine marry than to be beat in public like that, an’ by another woman. Ain’t it a fac’, now, ain’t it?”

Jerry admitted that it was a fact. He was thoroughly convinced. More, he was hypnotized and completely taken in by Otheller’s deft switching from false premise to pleasing conclusion. The plan of Otheller appeared perfect in every detail. Jerry was to get satisfying revenge upon Isaac Gethers, escape the consequences of it, avoid scandal, reunite himself to a docile and contrite Ethline and celebrate his own supremacy by witnessing her public defeat at the election. There didn’t seem to be a flaw.

He expressed that opinion to Otheller and Otheller chuckled.

“No,” he agreed readily, “they ain’t nothin’ wrong with it a-tall. Not a thing.” And then

to himself added: "S'far's I is concerned."

Otheller whistled blithely as he parted from Jerry and went in search of Isaac Gethers. He found Brother Gethers blithely confident of his success at the approaching election and extremely appreciative of Otheller's infinite wisdom in introducing Ethline as a candidate. Isaac had been through many a wild-eyed experience with his wife since her jealousy of Ethline had become aroused, but he counted the world well lost should he be victorious over her that night.

"It's gwine be a lesson she is been needin' fo' the longes' time," he said.

Otheller accepted a cigar and came straight to the point.

"We ain't want nothin' to go wrong t'night, Brother Gethers, does we?"

"We shuah don't."

"Theyfo' it becomes nessery that you an' Sis' Ethline have a confe'ence jes' befo' the meetin' takes place. Co'se I is gwine be there too. We wan's to prepare fo' all continguncies."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"You said it. Now lis'en heah at what I is sayin': You know that house which Brother November Spurling used to live in up the alley from the lodge rooms?"

"Yeh."

"Well, at eight o'clock t'night I is gwine meet you an' Sis' Ethline up there an' we is gwine talk

over final plans. Co'se it goes 'thout sayin' that meetin' is on the stric' K. T. 'Medjitly as we finishes I is gwine 'sco't Sis' Ethline to the meetin' an' you is to folly a couple of minutes later — see?"

"I see; I see."

"Co'se if'n anythin' sh'd prevent my comin' there, don't you wait no longer'n eight-fifteen. If'n it sh'd be that I ain't there, you bring Sis' Ethline down the alley yo' ownse'f an' lef' her just outside the do' of the lodge rooms."

Secret conferences with Otheller and the fair Ethline had gone to Isaac's head. He was intoxicated by the atmosphere of conspiracy which completely surrounded the election. And of course he agreed to be at the appointed spot at the designated hour. He agreed gratefully and effusively.

"Brother Heyward," he concluded, "you is shuah been the bestes' frien' which I is ever had."

Otheller returned a delphic answer:

"You ain't know how good a frien' I really has been, Brother Gethers."

From the presence of the potentate he made his way to the home of the girl whom he desired first to elect to the rulership of the lodge and later of his home. He found her on the qui vive with excitement and busy over a ravishing election gown. To her he disclosed the plans for the conference at the Spurling home. She was as receptive as Isaac had been — and as unsuspecting.

"Co'se, above all things what is, Sis' Ethline, you

ain't to tell Jerry 'bouten this talky-talk which you and Brother Gethers is gwine have t'night."

"Ain't no chancet of that, Brother Heyward."

"'Member — eight o'clock. An' be on time."

"I is gwine be 'head o' time."

"Good!" He turned away, paused and then as an afterthought—"An' say, Sis' Ethline, case'n anythin' sh'd go wrong an' I don' git to meet you-all at the Spurling house, you an' Brother Gethers be shuah an' git to the meetin' in time. I reckon you'd better go right down the alley. Whatever you does, don' miss that meetin', even if'n sumthin' sh'd prevent me from showin' up an' bein' there."

Ethline promised happily. Otheller departed the same way. During the afternoon he shot a masterly cue at Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlour whilst freely devouring many savoury sandwiches. His plans were letter-perfect. Isaac had suffered miserably at home and was destined to get quietly and efficiently beaten up and finally defeated because of his absence from the meeting. More, that very absence would insure the election of Ethline over Christeen, and Otheller knew that in the flush of victory the girl of his choice would fairly fling herself into his arms.

Night came; clear, balmy, star-sprinkled. Fraternal darktown breathed tensely. By seven o'clock the membership began to gather at the lodge rooms of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise. Circulating through the knots of eager gossipers

was Otheller Heyward; insinuating himself wherever he fancied there might be something of interest under discussion.

The consensus of opinion was that Isaac Gethers was certain of election over either or both of the feminine candidates. The female vote was turning out in excited, overdressed force but it was obviously split. Most of them didn't want to vote for Ethline and were bitter against the uppity Christeen. Otheller was very well pleased with himself at having insured against Isaac's presence at the meeting. As between Ethline and Christeen the former was a sure thing.

By eight o'clock the lodge rooms were packed. It appeared that every member was present. Otheller seated himself in a corner and gave himself over to the enjoyment of envisioning the scene up the alley; Jerry Skillet skulking darkly in the shadow; Isaac Gethers and Ethline Rollerson cooling their heels in the vacant and therefore lightless Spurling house awaiting the coming of Otheller.

At eight-ten action was promised. Otheller knew that nothing could keep Isaac from an attempt to get to the meeting and to make assurance doubly sure he had impressed upon both would-be conferees that they were not to wait overlong in the event that he failed to put in appearance. Otheller knew further that as soon as the meeting was called to order — and Christeen would see to



it that there was no delay — routine business would be dispensed with by viva voce vote and nominations for the Grand Magnificent High Potentate be called for. Then with Ethline and Christeen present and Isaac lying unconscious up the alley — it was all Otheller could do to keep from laughing aloud.

Christeen was present in full force. She oozed industriously through the crowd; a smile, resurrected from an affable and long-forgotten past, stuck upon her long since soured physiognomy.

At eight-fifteen Otheller became fidgety. He kept his eyes riveted on the door. There were no signs of Ethline and Jerry. Above all things, save one, Otheller least desired unanimous election of Christeen. At eight-seventeen there was a burst of applause emanating from the crowd about the entrance. Otheller rose, started forward to greet Ethline, then paused in frozen horror.

Entering the door, a genial, victorious smile upon his fat and flabby face; his clothes unruffled, celluloid collar glistening in all its pristine beauty, patently no victim to a jealous and hard-fisted rival, was Isaac Gethers, Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise!

Isaac Gethers! Otheller writhed under a sudden surge of illness. He was faint and weak. Isaac's very presence at the meeting meant that

Isaac was certain to win. In a jiffy Otheller's carefully laid plans had gone flooie. He couldn't understand it. There was Isaac tantalizingly serene and smiling, but he caught no glimpse of Ethline.

"Somebody," he reflected gloomily, "is shuah gone an' played hell!"

He glanced at his watch. It indicated eight-twenty. Still no sign of Ethline. And Otheller was a game fighter; he was determined that Ethline must be produced on the barren chance of victory. He fought his way fiercely through the crowd and seized the beatific Isaac by the arm.

"Where Sis' Ethline is at?" he sibilated.

Isaac favoured him with a blank stare. "Sis' Ethline?"

"Yeh!" Where is she at?"

"Ain't she here?"

Otheller shook him with angry impatience. "Look heah, man, does you reckon I'd be astin' you where she was at if'n she was heah? Where has you been? Ain't you been to Brother November Spurling's house?"

Isaac shook his head.

"No, I ain't been there. I was kept late to my wuk an' when I got off an' dressed it was so late I was skeered I'd miss the meetin'. So I come straight heah. The confe'ence wa'n't ve'y impo'tant, was it?"

"Yeh," howled Otheller, "it shuah was! If'n you knowed what I know you'd think it was dam' impo'tant."

Otheller had one idea and one only — to get Ethline to the meeting and take a gambler's chance of victory. He let loose a throaty bellow and battled his way to the door. He reached the corner in one second flat and clipped something off that in negotiating the rest of the distance. He approached the Spurling house from the street, dashing through the yard of some white folks and entering the rear door of the shack.

The three-room cabin was exceedingly dark and gloomy. From the Stygian blackness there came a querulous female voice:

"That you, Brother Gethers?"

Otheller progressed to the sound and clutched Ethline by one plump rounded arm.

"No, 'tain't. It's me, Otheller Heyward. Brother Gethers is to the meetin' a'ready. How long is you been waitin'?"

"Sence befo' eight o'clock."

He propelled her violently to the door.

"Heah's where you quits waitin'. The meetin' is jes' about to staht an' we is got less'n no time to lose. If'n we ain't there mighty quick the beans'll all be spilt. C'mon!"

They shot through the door and down the alley. Otheller was taking no chances. He knew that it was a ten-to-one shot that even with Ethline in

the race Isaac would win hands down, but in matters political there is ever the element of uncertainty and Otheller was playing his last forlorn hope straight across the board.

They sped down the alley, slipping and stumbling in the blackness. The brilliantly lighted hall beckoned to them imperiously.

And then a particularly dark shadow detached itself from the impenetrable gloom along the side of the alley. It moved with soft cautious tread and set itself. Otheller drew unsuspectingly closer and closer to the all-but-hidden menace. The arm of the shadow drew back tautly. Then it leaped into action.

The blow squashed squarely against the side of Otheller Heyward's jaw. And as Otheller sank limply to the pavement he heard, in his last conscious moment, the triumphant voice of Jerry Skillet: "I got him that time!"

Otheller opened his eyes upon a heaven liberally besprinkled with twinkling stars. He tried to rise, gave it up as a bad job and sank back with a groan of misery. He attempted speech and discovered that his jaw had gone on a strike. It was throbbingly sore and decorated with a large tender lump.

He rolled his eyes in agony of apprehension. He understood that he had been the victim of a mistake but that did not lessen his suffering. Beside him a silhouette bulked largely against the face of a new moon. At first he couldn't understand. The

shadow was not that of a woman, nor was it the exclusive property of a man. Finally Otheller miserably figured it out. The figure was composite—man and woman locked in ardent embrace. Instinct and circumstance informed him that he was gazing upon a very much reunited Jerry Skillet and Ethline Rollerson. He turned loose a loud and fervent groan.

The silhouette parted in the middle and man and woman turned vindictively upon him. Otheller struggled to a sitting posture and remained there. Jerry's attitude indicated that he was safer where he was than he would be upon his feet.

"They is a mistake," faltered Otheller.

"Ain't no mistake," growled Jerry.

"I ain't Isaac."

"I know you ain't. But I hit the right man jes' the same. Me an' Ethline is been splain' things. Yassuh, we is been splainin' a heap of things to each other."

"Y-y-y-you is?"

"Yeh, we is. When I busted you fust off, Otheller, I thought you was Isaac Gethers. But sence that time Ethline is been tellin' me 'bouten how you is double-crossed us an' I know I ain't made no mistake a-tall. An' I is wa'nin' you right now, Otheller Heyward, either you makes yo'se'f mighty scarce roun' heah or I is li'ble to hit the right man again."

Otheller staggered to his feet. He knew when

he was beaten. He lurched dizzily down the alley toward the lodge rooms, one hand clapped against his sadly bruised jaw, his mind still busy with the picture of the unmistakable embrace he had witnessed.

In the glow of the lodge windows he glanced at his watch which had managed to survive the shambles. It indicated ten minutes before nine o'clock. Otheller slipped through the entrance and stood uneasily near the door. The meeting was in a pandemonium.

"'Lection been hel' yet?" he queried of a brother standing near by.

"Shuah is."

"Who won?"

"Isaac Gethers! He got him 'bout six votes fo' ev'y one Sis' Christeen got an' she is plumb mad."

Otheller spied her coming down the aisle toward him. His neighbour had described her mental condition conservatively. Christeen was in a rich red fury. Otheller decided unanimously that it would be unwise for him to remain where he was. Birmingham had grown mighty small in the last half hour.

Much too small for him.

He eased through the door. He reached his boarding house and loaded two hand bags.

He dropped into Bud Pealar's and collected what money was due him and progressed wearily to the railway station. He bought a ticket for Memphis

and lay back to wait the hour of his train's departure.

And suddenly he smiled. The smile broadened and became a chuckle. The chuckle blossomed into a laugh.

“My golly!” he mused. “Jes’ s’posin’ that had of been Isaac Gethers!”

TWINKLE, TWINKLE, MOVIE STAR

WHEN Miss Jasmine Poston, of Jacksonville, Florida, alighted from the north-bound L. & N. train at Decatur, Alabama, the coloured folk at the station gasped. Miss Poston, erstwhile chambermaid at Palm Beach and Miami, was a creature from a fairy world. She was of medium height and liberal figure, a rich chocolate in complexion and the very last word in style. She placed her genuine-leather grip on the platform and stood searching the dark-skinned crowd before the door of the coloured waiting room with level wide-set eyes.

Mr. Probable Huff, of Decatur, who was standing near by arrayed in drab overalls and a sadly misused flannel shirt, gazed at her and found her good to look upon. He made the mistake of expressing the spontaneous sentiment to Miss Lou Ellen Nuch, a lady as intransigently dusky as himself and nearly twice as large. Miss Nuch, being the betrothed of Mr. Huff, did not effervesce with enthusiasm. She was poignantly aware of the fact that beside the radiant stranger she resembled a torn joker in a new pinochle deck.

Mr. Probable Huff struck a pose. It was a very good pose as poses go and had the advantage of

being decorated. Upon the middle finger of Mr. Huff's left hand reposed a handsome signet ring — a ring valued by local jewellers at something more than twenty dollars. The ring had been presented to Probable by a white gentleman for whom Probable had once done the insignificant favour of life saving. Probable considered that he had been grossly overpaid; but the gratefully alive white gentleman thought otherwise, and gave also unto Probable a lifelong job as general handy man, with the privilege of doubling as chaperon to a flivver.

Probable liked the job. At least, he was not opposed to it. But it was the twenty-dollar ring that was the delight of Probable's heart and the pride of his single-track life. With its mellow glory decorating his ebony finger, he was a man of parts; one to be looked up to and consulted upon all vital matters. As for the donor of the ring, he did not let gratitude blind him to the mental attainments of his coloured friend: "Good boy — Probable is; but there's an ivory mine above his neck."

And Probable was striving with might and main to prove the correctness of the white gentleman's cranial analysis. For despite the evident displeasure of his fiancée, Probable continued to stare at Miss Jasmine Poston, while he manœuvred to catch the rays of the evening sun and reflect them into her eyes.

His efforts to be noticed were not very successful.

So far as Miss Poston was concerned, he was about as prominent as a nickel in a four-bit crap game.

And then she moved. She was ardently embraced and moistly osculated by Mrs. Daisybell Reckling. Mrs. Reckling was enthusiastic. She was counting upon the urban Jasmine to make definitely secure for her the social pre-eminence she craved. Jasmine did her job well. She bloomed exotically at a series of affairs ranging from formal dances to equally formal and far more filling barbecues. The dark Decaturites never quite recovered from their awe of this splendid creature from Jacksonville. It was her incomparable poise that staggered them. She was never flustered, never jarred from her magnificent mental equilibrium, and always at her best.

Decatur found her best excessively above par. There was no highbrow air or social grace of the best hotel in Palm Beach that Jasmine had failed to appropriate. Attrition with the socially fortunate who winter in Southern Florida had imparted an ease of manner that was perfection — Decaturately speaking.

She was impartially agreeable to everybody, and especially to those of the masculine persuasion. She was particularly nice to Mr. Probable Huff, principally because of the fact that Probable was unusually attentive to her.

Miss Poston had gone thoroughly and completely to Probable's head. At first he had admired her

from a dark-brown background; and then, when she continued to bestow the full warmth of her rich smile upon him, he emerged from his shell of bashfulness, invested in a new and aggressively blue suit, polished up his signet ring and laid siege to her unmortgaged heart.

Jasmine was not personally interested; in fact, it is doubtful that she could have remembered ten words spoken by Probable during an evening ten minutes after that evening had ended. Her tolerance of him was the graciousness of one to the manner born; a queen who does not differentiate between men during her reign and to whom actions are more to be counted than mere words or tiresome blandishments.

Lou Ellen Nuch, however, looked upon the affair differently. Lou Ellen — not a whit more cosmopolitan than her lover — was decidedly more observant. The very things that attracted Probable to Jasmine repelled Lou Ellen.

“If’n you is got to make a fool outen yo’s’e’f, Prob’le, fo’ the Lawd’s sake run after a woman which you is in the class with.”

“Ain’t runnin’ after no woman.”

“Huh! Mebbe they’s some folks which says you ain’t; but I ain’t met ’em ontill yet.”

“Folks’ says don’t hu’t nobody. I is on’y jes’ tryin’ to show Miss Poston a good time, countin’ she is visitin’ Sis’ Daisybell, an’ me’n her is always been good frien’s.”

"You sho' mus' be pow'ful good frien's!" sniffed Lou Ellen. "You is shinin' up to this heah Jasmine gal a heap mo' perky than what you ever done to me."

"They is a diff'ence," explained Probable patiently. "I an' you is engage'."

Lou Ellen's warning inflamed rather than subdued the idolatry of Mr. Huff. He withdrew considerable of his savings' account and invested it in candy for the fair visitor. He — through force of convention and circumstance — escorted his fiancée to the various social affairs given in honour of Miss Poston, and invariably deserted his wife-to-be to flutter, mothlike, about the flame of Jasmine's vivid personality.

Lou Ellen disliked Jasmine. That condition did not cause Miss Poston any special worry and only served the end of embittering Probable against the woman to whom he had unguardedly pledged himself. He considered her lacking in discrimination and entirely too narrow-minded for a man of his discernment. Besides, as he voluminously explained to Miss Nuch, Jasmine could not possibly find anything seriously interesting in so humdrum a mortal as himself.

Lou Ellen viewed matters from a different angle. She had the feminine weakness for falling in love and entertained toward the ebony and passive Probable a passion that at times frightened and always bored him. She was a good-enough girl and a

supercook; but he had taken her for granted so long that her virtues had lost their pristine novelty. There had not even been zest in his courtship of her.

“ I think you is a pow’ful nice gal, Lou Ellen. I likes you real fine. How ’bout I an’ you gittin’ ma’ied some day? ”

With which, strong arms had half strangled him and she had signified delirious assent by a long and clinging kiss.

Jasmine was different. For the first time in his life Probable was experiencing the zest of the chase. It was a novel and entrancing experience. Jasmine affected him like fresh corn liquor.

“ Co’s’e she ain’t gwine have nothin’ to do with no man like’n to me! ” he confided to Lou Ellen.

Lou Ellen slipped. She made a tactical error. But she wasn’t feeling any too spry that day and her bitterness formed words before she could summon discretion to control her tongue.

“ Ain’t see why. You is got a han’some ring an’ a good job, an’ is frien’ly with all the white folks heahabouts.”

“ You mean you really thinks she is done fell in love with me? ”

“ Reckon even her c’n be as big a fool as what I is been, Prob’le.”

It was a new and entrancing idea to the bashful, unsophisticated Probable. He had dared hope that she might like him a little bit, but the suggestion

of his fiancée that Jasmine had succumbed to his jewelled charms was staggering.

Of course it was Lou Ellen's fault. She put the idea into Probable's head; and, once there, the suggestion fermented. Probable set grimly out to discover what was what.

Jasmine was familiar with the symptoms and vastly amused. She toyed verbally with her tongue-tied wooer and led him through labyrinthine conversational channels that did not even approach the point at which he might have made declaration of his undying passion.

And finally and desperately Probable bethought himself of his ring.

Probable didn't care any more for his ring than he did for his life. Nor did he value it more highly. It had remained on its finger despite the passionate protestations of Lou Ellen Nuch. It dazzled Decatur, and he fancied that it might well prove a talisman to the belle of Jacksonville and Palm Beach. Before he understood what he was doing he slipped the ring from his finger and sat twirling it nervously.

"Pretty ring, ain't it, Miss Poston?"

"Beautiful!" she answered conventionally.

"Bet it'd look good on yo' finger."

"Le's see." She extended her hand and he slid the ring into place. "Oh, it's puffed'ly lovely!"

Probable became emboldened.

"When I put that ring on I done made a wish,

Miss Poston. 'Tain't comin' true if'n you takes it off."

"You mean you wan's me to wear it fo' a few days?"

"Uh-huh!" He looked up eagerly. "If'n you would."

"Sho'ly," she returned indifferently. "I always like to 'blige my frien's."

"Does you want to know what I wisht?" He coughed.

"No, indeedy! 'Twouldn't come true if'n you was to tell me."

That was as close as Probable came to a proposal of marriage. When they parted that night Jasmine had almost forgotten the ring and Probable was elated. He had made the ultimate sacrifice for love; parted with the bauble which meant most in his life; and it was incomprehensible that she should fail to understand the significance of the ceremonial. He retired, to lie wide-eyed and dream of a future with Miss Poston cast in the rôle of Mrs. Probable Huff.

The first squall generated next morning when Lou Ellen passed Jasmine on the street and spotted the ring. It meant but one thing to Lou Ellen, and she sped on in search of Probable. She found that gentleman tinkering with his employer's near car in the rear of that gentleman's handsome residence.

Lou Ellen demanded an explanation in no uncer-

tain terms, and she got it the same way. Whereupon their engagement ceased to exist.

"An' I is tellin' you one thing, Mistuh Prob'le Huff — you is done made a bigger fool of yo'se'f even than what the Lawd intended. You is gwine be sorry — an' soon! This heah woman ain't all what you think she is; an'——"

"If'n she was," snapped Probable with frigid dignity, "she'd be wearin' wings!"

The morning mail delivery on the day following brought to Miss Poston a letter. It was post-marked Jacksonville, and began:

"My dere respected Miss Jasmine."

It went on to say that the writer — a porter on a train plying between Jacksonville and Birmingham — would arrive in the latter place that evening. It said further that he was on exceedingly friendly terms with the conductor and had arranged with that dignitary to carry Miss Poston farelessly to Florida on the return trip, which was scheduled for the day following.

Jasmine waxed enthusiastic. Her visit was virtually at an end and she had no compunctions about slicing from it the few remaining days. The proposition of her porter friend, therefore, timed nicely with her desires and promised a considerable saving of cash. She plunged immediately into an orgy of packing, rushed to the station, and barely managed to catch the early afternoon accommodation for Birmingham.

She relaxed against the near-velvet cushions, her eyes dwelling languidly upon the pleasing topography of Northern Alabama. She dozed. She divested herself of her coat and idly slipped brown kid gloves from her hands.

Then she sat up very straight.

"Golly Moses!" she ejaculated softly. "I plumb f'got to return that funny li'l' feller's ring back to him!"

Meantime the news of Jasmine's hurried departure became bruited about Decatur and eventually reached the keen ears of Miss Lou Ellen Nuch. Miss Nuch dropped her rolling-pin upon the kitchen floor of the white folks for whom she worked, grossly deserted the noodles then in process of manufacture, and travelled to Probable's proximity in high gear.

That gentleman was still engaged in the absorbing pastime of trying to induce a recalcitrant carburetor to perform something akin to its proper function. He was perspiring and profusely profane. Sight of Lou Ellen did not make him less so.

She applied brakes and pulled up short, eyes glaring triumphantly, like headlights on a dark country road. She fairly oozed vicious satisfaction.

"Tol' you so!"

"Off! You is tol' me a whole passel of things which ain't so."

"An' now what you gwine do 'bout'n it?"

"'Bout which?"

"Yo' ring!"

Mention of Probable's ring was as certain to command attention from that gentleman as comment on a precocious infant will bring a young mother up smiling.

"I is tol' you 'bout'n that ring ——"

"Hush yo' fool mouth, Prob'le! You ain't know nothin' a-tall 'bout'n that ring."

"But ——"

"You even knows less'n that."

"Splain yo'se'f, Lou Ellen. When you talks like what you is talkin' now — which is mos' all the time — you gits me plumb irrumtated."

"Git irrumtated all what you likes, Prob'le Huff. Because the mos' irrumtated what you gits now ain't nothin' to what you is gwine be when you heahs all which I is got to tell you; or even a li'l' bit of it."

"'Bout'n the ring?"

"Uh-huh!"

"What 'bout it?"

"It ain't!"

"Ain't what?"

"Ain't heah!"

"What ain't heah?"

"Yo' ring. N'r neither Jasmine Poston ain't heah."

"Where is she at?"

"She's done flew."

"Gone away?"

"Absotively an' completely! An' you cain't say I ain't wa'ned you not to have nothin' to do with no high yaller from Flo'ida, cause'n I is; an'——"

Terror struck at the heart of Mr. Probable Huff.

He dropped his tools and abandoned the carburetor to its fate, then and there.

"You is jes' makin' foolish talk with yo' mouth, Lou Ellen. Ise gwine fin' out things fo' my own se'f."

He did. He discovered much more than he anticipated. He was unable to locate Mrs. Daisybell Reckling, but from a vague and loquacious junior member of the Reckling household he learned that Jasmine had departed in a hectic hurry.

He returned to Lou Ellen very much sadder and infinitely wiser. Circumstances had chastened him efficiently. Better men than Probable had harkened to the song of the siren, but never one more disastrously. He was crestfallen to the *n*th degree, miserable to extinction, and pathetically eager for the sympathy of the woman to whom he had been engaged until that fateful morning.

The sun was shining and Lou Ellen made hay. She made a great deal of hay. She roped in the fickle Probable while the roping was good, and a wild if impromptu party that night celebrated the nuptials of Mr. Huff and Miss Nuch.

During the afternoon of frenzied preparation for the wedding of Probable and Lou Ellen much of a

disconcerting nature had been happening to the train upon which Jasmine rode to meet her porter friend. First, a hot box and second, a hot box. And then a freight train ahead was inconsiderate enough to run into generously spreading rails, with results disastrous to traffic on the main line.

When the Decatur accommodation limped under the sombre shed of the Birmingham station the train on which Jasmine's friend pursued his profession had long since departed for Jacksonville, and inquiry at the Terminal developed the fact that the train crew was not due in Alabama's Queen City until the second day following.

Jasmine Poston repaired miserably to the coloured waiting room, where she sank upon a bench and reflected gloomily on the prospect of forty-eight hours in a large city where she was unacquainted. The vista was not pleasing. She racked the storehouse of her mind for recollection of some friend who had a friend in Birmingham, but could remember no one. She inquired the price of a ticket to Jacksonville and returned to cogitate further.

And finally she decided — albeit reluctantly — that a two-day wait was not worth a free ride to Jacksonville. She rose and headed for the ticket window. She probed for the clasp of her hand bag, intending to extract therefrom the purse containing her money. Then she stopped short and emitted a doleful groan.

The hand bag gaped. The purse was gone!

Two minutes of intensive search convinced her beyond peradventure of doubt that she was destitute of lucre. In a coat pocket she discovered fifty-five cents. That was all. She speculated sadly upon the manner of her loss and derived small solace from a realization that the purse had probably slipped to the floor of the train during one of her dozing spells through the long and tiresome trip down from Decatur.

Two facts leered at her: She was in a strange, friendless city and she was flat broke. More, she was hungry. She fondly caressed the fifty-five cents, passed from the coloured waiting room to the curbing of Twenty-sixth Street and eventually found her way to a respectable-appearing coloured restaurant, where she seated herself and ordered coffee and hot cakes—a total of fifteen cents to be subtracted from her meagre hoard.

Night was falling. The lights of the massive Terminal Station winked mockingly at her from across the street. Many street cars rumbled defiantly by the door, some of them bound for the heart of the city, others for the suburbs. They were filled to capacity plus, and she found a new source of misery in the reflection that each of the thousands of passengers was bound toward a definite objective, where friends were waiting. She—Jasmine—alone of the thousands, was a derelict and acquaintanceless.

The watery coffee and flaccid cakes were served. Once again she doffed her gloves and once again her eyes lighted upon the handsome ring of Mr. Probable Huff. Her lips wreathed in disgust. "I might of knowed anythin' c'nnected with that feller was bad luck!" Then an idea struck her; she would pawn the ring. But she shook her head as she discarded the idea before it was well born. First, she was fearful of consequences should she be detected pawning the jewellery of another; and she realized that at this hour all worth-while loan offices were closed.

The cakes seemed tasteless, the coffee insipid. She was temporarily bereft of interest in life and, for once, Decatur would have appealed to her æsthetic sensibilities. The lost purse and the potentialities of the situation robbed existence of its immediate zest, and she had never been one to bother materially over the future.

She dawdled deliberately over the meal. And then she became conscious of a pair of eyes boring through the back of her head. She tried to shake off the sensation, failed, turned, and caught the frankly approving stare of a coloured gentleman who was rapidly making away with a succulent porterhouse, liberally garnished with onions.

She was not unused to that admiring light in the eyes of men; but, at first, she was somewhat surprised to see it here, for she had fancied that her whelming misery was reflected on her face. And

she prolonged her stare in the direction of the proprietor of the porterhouse. He looked like ready money, and a great deal of it — a very great deal.

He was above medium size and a triumph of sartorial art. His suit was a gentle pearl grey; his socks were of grey silk; his shoes, white buckskin. A diamond blazed from his left hand and its twin glittered from a red-and-white-striped scarf.

He ate amply but unhurriedly, as though the feast spread before him was something to which he was accustomed. And as he ate he returned the stare of the girl at the other table. Then both, without thought of flirting, smiled.

The smiles were ingenuous. They were frank. Neither gaze wavered. They instinctively liked each other, and each was willing that the other should know it.

The man, sophisticated to a degree, rose, crossed to Jasmine and bowed respectfully:

“Ain’t I met you somewheres befo’?”

She shook her head.

“No; I ain’t think you is. But it wa’n’t my fault.”

He seated himself and critically surveyed her unappealing repast.

“You ain’t act hongry.”

“Ain’t act is a liar. I ain’t never been quite so hongry in my whole nachel life.”

He nodded toward his table.

"If'n you would join me — My name is Mistuh Hammond Bias, an' I is the sole owner an' exclusive proprietor of the Jim-dandy Theatre, showin' on'y the bes', fines' an' lates' photoplay productions which is."

She rose with alacrity.

"I reckon you is gwine think I ain't no lady to 'cept yo' offer this away; but I is done los' my pocketbook an' I ain't got on'y fo'ty cents lef'."

He ordered plentifully and then essayed a question:

"Know anybody in Bummin'ham?"

"Nope."

"Not no one a-tall?"

"Nary pusson."

"Hahd luck! How long you is gwine be heah?"

"On'y jes' until I c'n git away. I is got a gen'leman frien' which is a po'ter on the train betwix' heah an' Jacksonville, an' he is promise' to transpoh't me to home. I come down from Decatur, where I been visitin' at, an' when I got heah this even' I found my money had went. I come in heah to think things over. I reckon I is facin' a heap of trouble, Mistuh Bias."

He leaned forward interestedly.

"S'posin' you tells me 'bout'n it. Sometimes it's good to git things offen yo' chist."

Jasmine welcomed the opportunity for free speech and plenty of it; and between mouthfuls of eloquent pork chops and crisp crumbly toast

she told her story. She expanded in the approving light of his soft, understanding, wholly sympathetic eyes. She even went so far as to sketch humorously the infatuation entertained for her by Mr. Probable Huff, and she told her new friend of the ring with which she had unwittingly eloped. Mr. Bias' eyes narrowed.

"What soht of a man this heah Prob'le Huff is?"

She shrugged indifferently.

"Jes' nigger."

"You ain't keer pertickerly fo' him?"

"Him?" echoed the girl laughingly. "Golly! I woul'n't know what to do with a man like'n to that if I had him. But, bein' a visitor up to Decatur, I jes' nachelly had got to be nice to him, which is how come him to think I was really likin' him some."

Hammond Bias nodded relievedly.

"Go 'head with y' story."

She went ahead with it and brought it down to the minute with meticulous attention to detail. Toward the end of the tale the man lost the appearance of personal interest and a speculative light dawned in his eyes. Also, his spasmodic interrogations ceased, and she became conscious that he was studying her in an intent manner, which portended an interest more than casual and slightly less than flattering. He seemed to regard her as an objective entity. Finally she could stand it no longer.

"Wha's eatin' you, Mistuh Bias?" she inquired politely.

"Eatin' me 'bout which?"

"You is ceased from sayin' sumthin'."

He smiled slightly.

"I is been thinkin'. I feel's if I was gwine have an idee."

"If it hu'ts like'n to that ——"

"Wait silent jes' a minute." He continued to stare at her in a frankly impersonal, wholly appraising fashion. "You is a pow'ful pretty gal, Miss Poston."

"You is a flatt'rin' man, Mistuh Bias."

"And," he continued quietly, "if'n you was dressed swell you'd plumb go to the haid of any cullud pusson in Bummin'ham."

"My real good clothes is to the depot."

"You is wuk'd roun' swell white folks a heap, ain't you?"

"They ain't no sweller place than what Palm Beach is an' I is wuk'd they fo' two sicksessive yeahs."

"Hm! Ever have any movin'-pitcher actresses down they?"

"Pitcher actresses? Huh! Fo' a while this yeah movin'-pitcher actresses was the on'y thing we didn't have anythin' else but."

"And you is watched 'em?"

"Lis'en heah, Mistuh Bias. Where movin'-pitcher actresses is at they takes good keer to see

that you notices 'em. Gittin' noticed is the bestes' thing they does. An' what they is to know 'bout'n them, I knows it. An' tha's a fac'!"

Again silence fell between them. Finally his lips expanded into a broad, friendly, triumphant grin. "You done said it that time, Miss Poston."

"Said which?"

"Sumthin' which gives me the idee I a'mos' had."

"Meanin'?"

"Miss Poston, how'd you like to be a movin'-pitcher stah fo' 'bout'n two weeks?"

The girl smiled. She fancied her vis-à-vis was attempting humour and therefore that smiling was in order.

"How'd I like to have a thousan' dollars an' a autymobile? Whyn't you ast me a easy one like that?"

"Ise se'ius."

"You soun's foolish."

"Soun's foolish ain't is foolish. Now lis'en heah at what I is sayin', Miss Poston; cause'n it's a good idee, a elegant idee — specially countin' you ain't know nobody in Bummin'ham an' needs a temprurry job which is decent an' respectful.

"Y'see, Miss Poston, you ain't the on'y pusson which has troubles. They is others, Miss Poston, an' I is one of them others, countin' I is a business man, Miss Poston; an' when things go wrong with a business man they is onti'ely flooie.

“To staht off at the commencement of the be-
ginnin’, I is by perfession the sole owner an’ ex-
clusive proprietor of the Jim-dandy Theatre. We
shows the bes’ pitchers what is; but when I went
into the business I ain’t had enough n’r neither
s’fficient capital to open up downtown, where the
big cullid pitcher theatres is at. So I built me a
frame buildin’ on a lot which I owns in the bes’
cullud residential distric’. Co’s’e that makes my
overhead expenses ve’y light an’ I stahted makin’
money right offen the reel.” Mr. Bias stopped
suddenly, grinned broadly and then laughed loudly.
“I is a comickle feller, Miss Poston. See what a
joke I said then — ‘Right offen the reel’! Pitcher
reels — see?”

Miss Poston laughed politely. Mr. Bias re-
sumed:

“I begun gittin’ rich in a hurry. Whole lots
of rich! An’, of co’s’e, when a man is got brains
like’n to what I is got, an’ does sumthin’ ’riginal
like’n to what I is done, they is always some copy
cats which trails along an’ tries to do likewise
an’ also. This time it was Simmie Judge.

“Simme is a’right s’far’s he goes, Miss Poston;
but he don’t go ve’y far. He useter be a good
feller; but I reckon he’s like’n to yo’ Decatur frien’,
Mistuh Prob’le Huff. All what he is got below his
neck is pockets with money in ’em, an’ above his
neck they ain’t nothin’ ’ceptin’ on’y bone. Any-
way, he goes an’ builds the Real Nobility Theatre

jes' two do's from the Jim-dandy an' stahts into oppysition against me.

"Now if'n Simmie had any mo' sense'n a jackass, Miss Poston, he would of knowed fum the staht-off that while one theatre could make a heap of money in the residemial section, two theatres coul'nt do it. From the minute he opened his do's it was a fo'gone certainty an' a 'nevitabe c'nclusion that one of us had to go bust. But he is got heaps of money an' is been hangin' on tighter'n a bulldog; an' both of us is losin' money.

"Like'n I jes' said, Miss Poston, one of us is got to go out of business; an' I is been gittin' wo'ied lately that it was gwine be me, countin' he is got mo' capital than what I is got. Tha's pervidin' I ain't git no new idee. An', jes' settin' heah admirin' yo' talkin', a idee is came to me.

"An' this heah is the idee, Miss Poston: You know well as me that ev'y wunst in a while the white folks which runs pitcher shows goes an' gits some swell movie stah to come in pusson to they theatre an' 'dress the audiumces. Now I is been sayin' to myse'f: If'n white folks c'n make a heap of money doin' that, why cain't I? So I is decided that if'n you is willin', Miss Poston, countin' they ain't nobody in Bummin'ham which knows you, you is gwine be a pitcher stah an' make pussonal 'pearances fo' two weeks down to the Jim-dandy Theatre."

Jasmine, who had been listening pop-eyed to the

theatrical magnate, put out a restraining hand.

"I ain't want to be imperlite, Mistuh Bias; but sumthin' is gone an' went to yo' haid."

"Meanin' which?"

"What you is sayin' ain't nothin' 'ceptin' on'y a whole passel of foolishness."

"How come?"

"I ain't no movie actress."

"You is gwine be."

"You is plumb silly! Cullud folks don't git to be no movie stahs."

"Huh!"

He reached into an inner pocket and extracted an elaborate advertising folder, which bore the inscription:

CHARCOAL FILM CORPORATION

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Presenting the Greatest Negro Actors
of the Generation in a Series of
Feature Dramas and Side-Splitting
Comedies

"N'r neither that ain't all," pursued Mr. Bias enthusiastically. "They is heaps of cullud movie companies which is makin' pitchers; on'y this heah Cha'coal Company is a new one, an' they is been after me fo' a long time to book they fillums so's to git the Southern te'itory opened. Which is how come I to git so much litrachoor from offen them."

Once they gits stahted in the South, they is shuah they is gwine be a deman' fo' mo'.

“But, as it stan's now, they ain't no pitcher houses in the South bookin' the Cha'coal pitchers; so they ain't knowed heahabouts — neither the pitchers n'r the actors ain't. So I is gwine git you to call yo'sel'f some fancy name — Florabelle Gazelle, or sumthin' like that — an' give out that you is a stah of the Cha' coal Fillum Co'p'ration, an' that I is spent a whole lot of money gittin' you heah; an' you is gwine appear pussonal an' hol' receptions after each show.

“This heah whole idee came to me suddintlike while I was lis'enin' at you talkin'. They ain't no way it c'n go wrong. An' while you is heah ev'y-body is gwine crowd into the Jim-dandy Theatre. An', as they ain't 'nough audiumce to go round, Mistuh Simmie Judge's Real Nobility Theatre is gwine slump so's he'll git col' feet an' quit from runnin' his theatre. He ain't no spoht — Simmie ain't; an' he don't have to be punched ve'y hahd in the pocketbook befo' he grunts. Now I an' you —”

“But s'posin' I gits reckernized?”

“You ain't gwine be reckernized. You will be safe an' happy. I'll go git yo' trunk outen the depo'; an', case'n you ain't got no clothes which is swell enough, I'll pay fo' them what you needs. An', also, I is gwine stake you to the swellest room in Sally Crouch's Cozy Home Hotel, which is im-

minently respectful. Fu'thermo', cullud folks heah is gwine make a big to-do 'bout'n you, cause'n you is sech a slebrity; an' in addition to all that I'll pay you ten dollars a week an' yo' spenses back to Jacksonville fo' brawtus. Now what is you got to say 'bout'n it?"

Jasmine had plenty to say; and she said it. It was one of those propositions that shape up to the propositionee as being entirely too good to be true. But her very opposition to the scheme of Mr. Hammond Bias added fuel to the flame of that gentleman's enthusiasm.

For every argument against the scheme she advanced he countered with a more powerful pro.

And eventually he won her over. It had been a certainty from the outset that he would triumph. The prospect of new clothes, pre-eminence and the adulation that accompanies recognized stardom was too much for the girl. She fell. And that night she and her trunk were escorted to Sally Crouch's Cozy Home Hotel for Coloured in a yellow taxi; and Miss Jasmine Poston registered as:

"MISS FLORABELLE GAZELLE — Star Charcoal Fillum Copration — Chicago, Ills."

Sally Crouch, the alarmingly portly and dusky proprietress of the hotel, gazed at the register and then with popping eyes at the celebrity.

"You ain't!" she ejaculated.

Miss Poston's pose was perfect.

"Ain't which?"

"Ain't no pitcher stah."

"How come you to qualify as a expe't?"

Sally hastened to apologize:

"I ain't meant that se'ious, Miss Gazelle. I on'y been jokin'. On'y I ain't never seen no cullud pitcher actresses befo'; an — well, you jes' sohter taken my breath away."

"Reckon they is a heap of things you ain't never seed befo', Miss Crouch."

"You know I ain't meant no 'fense?"

Jasmine nodded regally.

"You is forgave. In all my millions of frien's an' admirers they ain't one which can say as fame has gave Florabelle Gazelle the swell' head."

Florabelle was ushered into the bridal suite of the Cozy Home Hotel, a bilious-appearing affair with a big brass bed; also a private bath, not too fondly worn. She reclined in an easy-chair, ordered a pitcher of ice water, and, that served, dismissed Sally Crouch with the languid wave of a gloved hand.

Sally departed from the room and from the hotel. She made a bee line for the home of her friend, Lustisha Atcherson, wife of Elijah Atcherson, M.D. She puffed into a chair, atremble with excitement.

It would have been difficult to find a person so perfectly the antithesis of Sally as Lustisha Atcherson. Sally was flagrantly figureless and notoriously good-natured. Mrs. Atcherson boasted a perfect though unduly plentiful figure and her na-

ture was hopelessly acrid. Where Sally was friendly with every one, Lustisha was the avowed enemy of mankind. "'Ceptin' on'y Christeen Gethers," remarked Pliny Driver once to his wife, "Lustisha Atcherson is the sourest woman which is; an' if'n Lustisha ever gits thin she's gwine be wuss." Lustisha had recently been losing weight. To her Sally brought tidings of the advent of Florabelle Gazelle.

Lustisha listened with tight-lipped intolerance. She was frigidly unenthusiastic over Sally's bubbly description of Florabelle's pulchritude. Lustisha's best friend — had she been blessed with one — would never have claimed good looks for Mrs. Atcherson. Homeliness was Lustisha's sorest point. And so, because Sally dwelt too long and too glowingly upon the perfections of face and figure with which the newcomer was blessed, Lustisha instinctively rose in arms against her. Lustisha even sniffed; and when Lustisha sniffed those who knew her prepared for action in great squally gobs.

"Movie stah, huh! Who says she's a movie stah?"

"She does."

"Who's she?"

"Florabelle Gazelle; an'——"

"Ain't never heard of her."

"She's stah'd by the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration."

"N'r neither I ain't never heard of it."

"I is," returned Sally triumphantly. "It's a ginuwine big fillum comp'ny."

Lustisha was impressed in spite of herself.

"Who brung her to the hotel?"

"Brother Hammond Bias, which owns the Jim-dandy Theatre."

Lustisha registered further impression.

"What he say she is doin' heah?"

"He brung her heah from Chicawgo to make talks an' hol' 'ceptions down to the Jim-dandy after each night show. I reckon tha's countin' Simmie Judge's Real Nobility Theatre is been hu'tin' his business some."

"An' I reckon he'll be hu'tin' Hammond Bias' business a heap mo'n that if'n he don't quit bringin' stage wimmin down to Bummin'ham. Reckon that gal spec's Bummin'ham sassiety to tu'n out an' do her proud?"

"Reckon she do," admitted the honest Sally.

"She thinks wrong."

Sally shook her head doubtfully.

"Dunno 'bout'n that. Reckon they ain't many cullud folks in Bummin'ham who woul'n't take on over a ginuwine movie stah, wunst they got the chancet."

"Heah's one which won't!" snapped Mrs. Atcherson.

"Well," retorted Sally, "heah's one which will. I think she's elegant."

Meantime Hammond Bias, proprietor of the Jim-dandy Theatre and creator of Florabelle Gazelle, was working. He sought Crispus Breach, fiery-penned editor of the *Weekly Epoch*, and forced that gentleman to alter the make-up for the edition due on the streets the following day. He informed Brother Breach of his coup in landing the personal services of the celebrated Florabelle Gazelle and tickled Mr. Breach with a half-page advertisement.

At the suggestion of Mr. Breach, Bias hustled back to the hotel, secured a photograph of Miss Jasmine Poston, autographed by her as Florabelle Gazelle, and carried it to a local engraving company. When the *Weekly Epoch* appeared the following morning a full two-thirds of its front page was given over to Florabelle.

From her maiden appearance at the six-o'clock show that evening Florabelle was a riot. Hammond Bias, ever a keen business man, immediately put a quietus on the antiquated system of "Enter when you will and leave when you get tired." Instead, he timed his shows: "Feature picture at 6:00 P. M.; reception by Miss Florabelle Gazelle at 7:15; second night show at 7:45; reception by Miss Gazelle at 9:00"—and so on. After each reception the theatre was emptied of patrons, with the result that, instead of playing to what is professionally termed "two houses and a half" a night, he exhibited to three capacity audiences.

Wednesday morning brown Birmingham hummed with laudations of Florabelle Gazelle. The town was her oyster and she had opened it wide. Garbed in a new cream-coloured coat suit, with hat and gloves to match, Miss Gazelle appeared for a brief talk after each picture, expressed her delight with the manifold beauties of Birmingham, regretful that her profession made residence there impossible, and then invited all who desired to meet her to step forward.

They all stepped. Until the thing was systematized they stepped on each other. Florabelle figured that she would be forced to sting Hammond for a new pair of gloves each day.

On the morning of her second day she visited a photographer and paid a bonus for speed in turning out a wholesale order. Two days later there appeared beside her a huge stack of photographs of herself, each inscribed:

“To my most intimate friend,
from Florabelle Gazelle.”

The photograph idea was a gold mine. The price was one dollar each. Pikers were few and far between, and conspicuously of the feminine gender.

Meantime she was, figuratively speaking, passed round on a silver platter. Midnight dances, afternoon automobile parties, bridge luncheons, restaurant dinners! Jasmine Poston's personality be-

came rapidly and completely absorbed by the queenly, exotic Florabelle.

As for Hammond Bias and the Jim-dandy Theatre, they flourished even as a pair of green bay trees. Money poured into the box office faster than the box office could accommodate it. Nor was that the sole source of the bliss which had descended upon Mr. Bias. The genuine glee was derived from realization of the gloom that had settled over the person of Mr. Simmie Judge and his Real Nobility Theatre, two doors down the street.

Adequate audiences at the Real Nobility Theatre were not. Mrs. Lustisha Atcherson, her instinctive hostility to the visiting celebrity fanned into overt dislike by one sight of Florabelle's perfectly tailored elegance, tried her best to divert the current of patronage to the Real Nobility; but, for once, Mrs. Atcherson found herself bereft of power.

Florabelle knew nothing of Mrs. Lustisha Atcherson or of that lady's aversion for her; and had she known she would have been unworried. Florabelle was enjoying herself to the ultima thule and the word "worry" had vanished from her lexicon.

Saturday night found Florabelle at the height of her glory. She had been magically transformed from a person to a personage. She stood upon her platform after each picture and languidly shook the hand of each awed patron who passed before her, mumbling polite and stereotyped nothings in

response to their bashful stammering introductions. She told each and all that she was glad to meet them and that the price of her autographed photograph was one dollar.

The second-show crowd on Saturday night was slightly more than capacity. The little frame theatre was jammed to the rafters with a crowd impatiently awaiting the end of the picture, which the operator, under orders, was running off at excessive speed. When it ended, Hammond Bias made a very brief talk, in which he announced that the reception would now be held. "An' please fo'm the line on the right, ladies an' gen'lemen. An' don't push; ev'rybody gits a chance."

Florabelle had graduated from the débutante class. The crowd that greeted her thrice nightly had long since ceased to be a number of individuals. It had become a homogeneous procession, composed of myriad persons who gripped one's hand and passed on, a pleasing proportion of them contributing one dollar and appropriating a photograph. Those who did so were the only ones who excited a ripple of interest in the bored though exalted mind of Florabelle.

They filed before her, shaking her hand interminably — a fat woman with a baby in her arms; a tall thin man; a little boy with chocolate on his fingers — "Lordy! 'Nother pair of gloves done been ruint!" — a pompous golden-brown individual with a pink carnation in his buttonhole; two

giggling girls, who remarked that it must be elegant to be an actress; a man in overalls.

And then, from the void of placid equanimity there came a bolt! It came quietly and unheralded; but for a brief instant Miss Florabelle Gazelle ceased to exist and a thoroughly panic-stricken Jasmine Poston took her place.

Out of the crowd there came a black calloused hand, which slipped diffidently into hers. She felt the boring of a pair of startled eyes. She raised hers idly and started the conventional greeting. And then she recognized the man behind the hand.

The man was Mr. Probable Huff, of Decatur, Alabama!

For perhaps three consecutive and æonlike seconds the tableau held — Jasmine Poston rigid in sudden fierce terror; Probable Huff paralyzed with surprise.

The woman was the first to recover a poise that had never yet forsaken her in a crisis. She slipped heroically back into character. She became — though not without dint of intensive mental effort — Florabelle Gazelle.

“Please’ to meet you, Mistuh — Mistuh ——”

Probable Huff gagged. He tried to moisten his tongue on lips as dry as July first.

“Yonder is my photographs,” murmured Miss Gazelle suavely. “They is autygraphed pussonally; ’n’ they cos’ on’y one dollar apiece each.”

But still Mr. Huff did not move. The crowd

surged forward impatiently. It grumbled and made remarks not complimentary to Mr. Huff or his immediate ancestors. A bored look took its place upon the face of Miss Gazelle, but she was careful to shield the frightened light of her eyes with modestly downcast lids. More — she thanked the fates that cream-coloured gloves effectually concealed the handsome signet ring which belonged to Mr. Probable Huff and which was at that very minute reposing on her finger. Mr. Huff spoke:

“Ain't I met you befo'?”

“Me? I hahdly remembers you. But then, I meets so many folks — Is you ever been to Chicawgo?”

“No. Is you ever been to Decatur?”

“Decatur, which?”

“Decatur, Alabama.”

“I don't think I is ever heard tell of it.”

Mr. Huff stared some more. His mind was on his lost ring.

“I'll jes' be swannied!”

“If'n you don't want no pitcher I reckon you better move on, Mistuh Wha's-yo'-name.”

“Yo' pitcher?”

“Yeh.”

A silver dollar clinked into the cigar box. Mr. Huff's fingers avidly clutched an autographed photograph of Miss Florabelle Gazelle. The crowd pressed forward and handshaking commenced where it had been interrupted. But as Mr. Huff

progressed toward the exit, puzzling with staring eyes over his newly acquired photograph, Miss Jasmine Poston saw his woolly head shake uncertainly.

Nor had the light of fear died from her eyes. It was intensified when, as the lights came on after the last show, preparatory to the reception, she saw Mr. Probable Huff in the rear of the theatre staring raptly toward her.

Jasmine gave herself over to a siege of headachy thought. She knew that when she left the theatre Mr. Probable Huff would be waiting to speak with her, and she was very much afraid that the days of her pleasant masquerade were nearing a disastrous end.

The potentialities of the situation horrified her. She had slipped blithely into the rôle of Florabelle Gazelle and she was about to slip out with disconcerting suddenness. She might even land in jail.

There was no gainsaying the fact that Probable Huff had recognized her. Only because of his ingrained provincialism had exposure been temporarily avoided. That Probable had not immediately raised a scene merely meant that he had been stunned by the shock of their meeting and that there existed in his mind merely a legal shadow of doubt which insured one slim chance of escape.

She racked her fertile brain for an accurate remembrance of Probable Huff. He was impression-

able — very; and gullible to a degree. Those, she knew, were his cardinal weaknesses. Patently it was her cue to play on them to the end of her own safety. Probable was positive — too positive — that she was Jasmine Poston; but he did not know it! Therefore the task confronting her was to convince him, once and for all, that she was Florabelle Gazelle.

And suddenly Jasmine smiled. Without exertion, she had caused Probable to lose his heart to her during the Decatur sojourn. And now, in the butterfly radiance of stardom, the same task ought to present no insurmountable difficulties. In brief, Miss Florabelle Gazelle determined she would vamp Mr. Probable Huff, to the end that in his infatuation Mr. Huff should forget Miss Jasmine Poston.

The idea was inspirational and Jasmine smiled beatifically over the simplicity of the solution. It appealed to her artistic sense — herself vamping a man for the purpose of making him forget her! There was a task worthy of the actress she claimed to be.

She realized, however, that Probable was hot on the trail of his ring. Therefore she doffed that bauble and slipped it safely into her stocking. She seated herself before the cracked mirror which decorated the wall of her dressing room and made sure that she was physically as attractive as Nature and applied art could make her. Then she sallied

forth, intent on bewitching Mr. Probable Huff; of ensnaring him in the web of her charm until Jasmine Poston had faded into lurid oblivion.

Jasmine's scheme was perfect—almost. It would have been quite perfect—and utterly different—had Jasmine known that on the day of her departure from Decatur, Probable Huff had taken unto himself a wife in the person of Lou Ellen Nuch. But of Probable's marriage Jasmine knew nothing, and she sallied blithely forth with the intention of vamping Mr. Huff, bridegroom, into ecstatic forgetfulness.

Mr. Huff was waiting. He was nervous and awkward as he teetered on the curb. And he was infinitely puzzled. Florabelle Gazelle looked like Jasmine, acted like Jasmine, her picture was the picture of Jasmine, she talked like Jasmine, she wrote like Jasmine; but—dawg-gawn it!—he couldn't quite make up his mind that she was Jasmine!

He was equally unsuccessful in convincing himself that she was not. His mind was a single-track affair, which progressed to conclusions slowly and laboriously. He was too mulish to admit that she was not his Decatur flame and too bewildered to assert that she was.

But there was more than a suspicion that Florabelle and Jasmine were the same. Such being the case, he knew the pseudo movie star was seized and possessed of that which Probable valued above

all else in the world, not even excluding his blushing bride. That ring had been the pride of Probable's drab existence for years; it was his line of demarcation in Decatur. And he was willing to go to any lengths to secure possession of his treasure. Convinced that Florabelle was Jasmine, resort to the authorities would not be beyond him in the event that she proved reluctant to return his jewellery.

So he stood on the curb awaiting her exit from the Jim-dandy Theatre, thanking his stars for the kindness of business fate which had hurry-called his employer to Birmingham from Decatur and prompted that gentleman to make the trip in his little car. The road, save for a single exceedingly bumpy stretch between Inglenook and Norwood, had been smooth and the journey pleasant.

The employer's business promised to be lengthy and he had put Probable up for the duration of the visit at the Cozy Home Hotel. And, time hanging heavily on his hands, Probable had drifted casually into the Jim-dandy. And now he didn't care how long he was forced to remain in Birmingham. He flattered himself that the trip was going to prove profitable.

Florabelle Gazelle left the theatre, covertly spotted Mr. Huff, and paused ostentatiously before him. He screwed up his courage to the sticking point and addressed her:

"Miss Pos — I mean, Miss Gazelle."

Florabelle swung on him in simulated high dudgeon.

"Tha's two times you done called me outen my name."

"I ain't meant nothin', Miss Gazelle. It's on'y countin' you look so much like'n to a gal which I been knowin' up to Decatur."

"You ain't say so! You mean she looks jes' zac'ly like me?"

"Yas'm. You sho' said sumthin' that time! She looks 'nough like you to be you."

Florabelle paused modestly, then flashed him an electric glance from between half-closed lids.

"An' you is tryin' to pick up a 'quaintanceship with me cause'n you was fon' of her?"

Probable flushed under his coat of racial tan.

"No'm — that is, I ain't keer no mo' 'bout'n this heah gal which I is been tellin' you of."

Florabelle had been moving slowly down the street. It had been a deft strategic move, for Probable found himself in step beside her, though still hazy as to how he got there.

"How come you ain't keer fo' her, Mistuh ——"

"Huff. Prob'le Huff, of Decatur, Alabama."

"How come you to be so' at her, Mistuh Huff?"

"She done me dirt!"

"No!"

"Yeh."

"Which way?"

"She come up to Decatur from Jacksonville,

Florida, where she live' at, an' made a dead set fo' me, countin' I had a swell an' expensive signet ring which the white folks had gave me. Come her to git that ring offen me, she leaves town right off, quick — jes' like'n to that!" And he snapped his fingers. "Fust thing I knowed 'bout'n she was goin'—she was gone."

"Where to?"

He shook his head slowly. For a few moments he had been completely duped. He had forgotten Jasmine in talking to Florabelle. Now he surveyed his companion deliberately. She met his eyes levelly, held them for a minute; then dimpled and smiled. A danger point had been safely passed — and she knew it.

"I dunno," he answered truthfully. "Jacksonville, I reckon. Then ag'in, mebbe 'tis Bummin'ham. She come thoo heah."

Jasmine was startled.

"An' you come after her?"

"Yes," lied Probable promptly.

Jasmine experienced a surge of genuine apprehension. It was squarely up to her to vamp the suspicious Probable, and vamp him hard. Nor was she fearful of a crude technic. Probable, she realized, was not overly gifted with discriminatory sensibilities. "You wan's yo' ring back, eh?"

"Tha's which. An'"—grimly—"Ise gwine git it."

"Ise bettin' you does. I bets when you wan's sumthin' you is a pow'ful bad man goin' after it."

Mr. Huff expanded proudly.

"I reckon they ain't nobody up to Decatur I takes no talk offen."

"An' this heah gal went an' run off with yo' ring?"

"Uh-huh! She done that ve'y same thing."

"Ain't it terrible what some wimmin'll do?" Florabelle sighed sympathetically.

"They fooled with the wrong man when they puck on me."

"Ain't it the truth now? I shuah would rather have you lovin' me than hatin' me."

Probable gasped. Unconsciously his mind leaped to a comparison of his bride with this radiant creature. The comparison was not overly flattering to the bride.

"I ain't hatin' you," he mumbled.

"N'r neither, I reckon, you coul'n't love no woman after what this Jacksonville gal done to you — huh?"

"I ain't sayin' that."

Probable passed up the obvious opportunity of mentioning his recent nuptials. Florabelle sighed ardently.

"You is sho'ly a won'erful man, Mistuh Huff! Ise bettin' you is pow'ful uppity with them Decatur folks."

"They pretty well min's me," he puffed importantly.

"You said it then!" She paused significantly. "I mos' usuamly goes with some man fo' a light supper after the show."

The hint was patent, even to Probable. They made their way to the Blue Star Restaurant for Ladies and Gents. Florabelle, now completely and confidently in character, tactfully ordered only a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee.

She worked hard. The light of doubt was slowly fading from the eyes of Mr. Probable Huff. It was almost gone, but not quite. She noticed that he was staring eagerly toward her gloved left hand and that he exhaled with audible disappointment when she casually drew off the glove and exposed ringless fingers. The ring itself nestled safely inside her stocking.

She fascinated the bewildered bridegroom. He caught himself wondering how he had ever con-founded such a witless creature as Jasmine Pos-ton with this delectable morsel of femininity. T'other dear charmer being away — with his ring — Florabelle exercised a monopoly.

Suddenly Probable ceased his gustatory gymnastics. He choked. His eyes widened with terror. Florabelle turned and followed the direction of his gaze. A stout woman had risen hastily from a near-by table and was waddling toward them, an

unholy light in her eyes. She towered over the table.

"Ain't this Brother Prob'le Huff, from Decatur?"

He grunted unwilling assent. She introduced herself and turned inquiringly toward Florabelle. Mr. Huff shakily introduced Miss Gazelle, the famous motion-picture actress. The lady beamed.

"I is so glad, Mistuh Huff, to meet yo' city frien'! I is gwine back to Albany on the mawnin' 'commodation an' I'll manage to stop off at Decatur long 'nough to mention that I seen you, an' that you is havin' a good time with yo' swell frien's."

"Ne'min'! Needn't bother."

"'Tain't no bother, Mistuh Huff. It's gwine be a positive pleasuah. You is got so many frien's which will be int'usted."

She ploughed away like a victorious dreadnought. Probable groaned loudly and fervently.

"I sho' is the world's champeen when it comes to playin' hell!" he ejaculated.

The visitation from the Albany lady had robbed Mr. Probable Huff of a little more than one hundred per cent of the interest he had managed to work up in Florabelle. He envisaged in crestfallen fashion the reception he would receive from Lou Ellen on his return to Decatur the following week. It was a foregone conclusion that Lou Ellen would

hear the tale — with embellishments. And Lou Ellen bore a deserved reputation for prompt and decisive action, sometimes — but not always — followed by grim negotiation. The prospect for Probable was anything but roseate.

Jasmine took her troubles to Proprietor Hammond Bias, of the Jim-dandy Theatre, the following morning. He listened attentively — and chuckled.

“You is shuah the thinkenes’ woman, Miss Poston!”

“I is a doin’ woman too, Mistuh Bias. But I wan’s an’ also needs yo’ advice. Does you think Florabelle Gazelle better be travellin’ along to Jacksonville?”

He shook his head.

“Nary travel! If’n he don’t a’ready think you ain’t Jasmine Poston he will by the time you git to wukin’ on him wunst mo’. My advice is that you do up yo’ ring fo’ mailin’ an’ give it to yo’ railroad frien’, which you says yo’ ownse’f is leaving heah on his run fo’ Jacksonville this afternoon. Then let him mail it from they to Prob’le Huff, in Decatur; an’ when he heahs ’bout’n it bein’ they fo’ him he’s gwine be shuah you is in Jacksonville, an’ ev’yt’ing’ll be chicken.”

“I ain’t keen ’bout runnin’ no risk.”

“Tain’t no risk,” negatived Hammond Bias. “It’s a shuah thing. Besides, they is too much money comin’ into the Jim-dandy box office now

fo' you to go quittin' on me. Two mo' weeks an' I'll have Simmie Judge an' his Real Nobility Theatre huntin' a slag heap to hide behin'."

"But if'n I was to be foun' out——"

"You ain't gwine be. C'n you git yo' han's on yo' Decatur frien' today?"

"Uh-huh! He's stayin' to the same hotel what I is."

Hammond Bias rubbed his palms together unctuously. The future was looking bright and he was reluctant to let a good thing end.

"Then you ain't got nary worry, Miss Jasmine. You gimme that ring to send off, while you go an' lay fo' Mistuh Prob'le Huff an' give him one mo' fust-class bang-up wampin'. If'n I ain't flatt'rin' you too much I'm bettin' that'll satsufy him an' make him posituve certain you ain't you."

Florabelle followed both the letter and the spirit of his advice. Poor Probable, frightened horribly and fearful of consequences, tried his level best to escape the toils of the charmer; but she would have none of that.

She worked swiftly and cleverly. She could not understand his diffidence and finally diagnosed it as a premonitory symptom of true love.

By five o'clock she had effectually convinced him that she was indeed Florabelle Gazelle, of Chicago. Well satisfied with her afternoon's work, Florabelle led the way from Capitol Park toward the Cozy Home Hotel. Probable followed, half a

pace in the rear, thoroughly miserable and embarrassed. He felt that his actions were unbecoming a bridegroom. But she hadn't even given him a chance to inform her that he was a bridegroom.

They mounted the narrow flight of red-carpeted stairs to the hotel lobby. And there they paused in petrified astonishment. For, seated on a davenport, staring at them with hard level eyes in which there was no hint of compromise, was Mrs. Probable Huff, née Lou Ellen Nuch!

Mrs. Huff rose stiffly and nodded imperiously to Mr. Probable Huff.

"Come 'long with me, Mistuh Huff. I wan's you to splain a few things, not the leastes' of which is that pitcher I foun' hangin' in yo' room!"

Mr. Huff emitted a dolorous sigh and limped weakly into the worst two hours of his career. Miss Poston made all haste to Mr. Hammond Bias. Once again he proved a good listener. By the time she completed her story his decision was ready.

"Ne'min' how this come to be, Miss Poston. You is jes' nachelly got to stick it out!"

"What you mean — is got to?"

"I mean jes' zac'ly what I done said. 'Cause why? 'Cause chances is they ain't no woman, an' speshully this heah Lou Ellen female, which is gwine be fooled so easy like Prob'le was. Her bein' 'gage' to him an' him havin' been lovin' you up to Decatur — she is got to git hit with a hammer befo' she is gwine b'lieve you is somebody else.

“ Now if’n you was to disappear she’d know good an’ well you was Jasmine Poston; an’ not on’y yo’d be plumb ruint, an’ mebbe ’rested fo’ false impressions of another pusson, but also I’d be ruint too. An’ if’n they come an’ ast you fo’ that ring it ain’t gwine do you no good, cause’n you ain’t even got that no mo’, countin’ I sent it to Jacksonville. No’m, Miss Poston; you is done said you is Florabelle Gazelle, an’ you is jes’ got to make this Nuch gal know you is her!”

Meantime things — many things — had occurred in the room occupied by Mr. Probable Huff in the Cozy Home Hotel. He stuck to his story that the girl was really Florabelle Gazelle and that she had sought him that day following his introduction the previous night in quest of the ring. As to the latter, Mrs. Huff was so sceptical that, after finding her vocabulary inadequate to express her opinion, she moved herself to a room across the hall. Regarding the identity of the woman who looked like Jasmine Poston, Mrs. Huff was too amazed to be entirely convinced either way. But instinct told her that it was an impostor. She summoned Sally Crouch to her room.

“ Who this heah Gazelle woman is, Miss Crouch? ”

Sally gave an enthusiastic and explicit answer.

“ When she ’rive heah? ” pursued Lou Ellen doggedly.

“ Las’ week.”

"Saturday night?"

"Lemme see. Yeh; 'twas Saturday night."

"I thought so!" Lou Ellen nodded grimly.

"What you 'sinuatin', Mis' Huff?"

"I mean that this heah woman ain't no Florabelle Gazelle any mo'n what you is. Her name is Jasmine Poston an' she's from Jacksonville, Flo'ida; an' she was visitin' up to Decatur until when she come heah. My husban' follered her to Bummin'ham, 'cause'n this meetin' between her an' him was all a frame-up."

Sally explained to Mrs. Huff that Mrs. Huff was making a grievous error. Mrs. Huff countered with the detailed story of her sudden matrimony and the turmoil that immediately preceded it. Sally was doubtful, but willing.

"Is you shuah 'bout'n what you is sayin', Mis' Huff?"

"Posolutely!"

"Well, all I is got to say that they is one woman in this town which will lis'en real cheerful to all you is got to tell like'n to what you jes' toi' me."

"Name which?"

"Lustisha Atcherson."

"Not the wife of Dr. 'Lijah Atcherson?"

"The ve'y same. She is said from the fust go-off that they was sumthin' wrong 'bout'n Florabelle Gazelle. Even countin' you is wrong, Mis' Huff, yo' s'picions'll make Lustisha happy."

One hour later the wild-eyed Mrs. Probable Huff

was seated in the parlour of the Atcherson house. She told her story voluminously. For the first time in months the lips of Mrs. Atcherson expanded from their firm set position into a smile.

"I knowed it!" enthused she.

"Which?"

"That this heah Florabelle Gazelle wa'n't nothin' on'y a impostor."

"But what is I to do?" wailed Mrs. Huff sobbily. "She's done got my new husban' so wamped he don' know if'n he's comin' or goin'."

"Is you willin' to leave this thing to me, Mis' Huff?"

"What you is plannin'?"

"I is gwine show that hussy up. I reckon that'll make yo' husban' feel cheap."

"You don't even know my husban'."

"Huh! That don't make no diff'ence. I is agin all husban's."

"How you gwine show her up?"

"Leave it to me, Mis' Huff. You c'n trus' me to git a good idee."

"I ain't shuah ——"

"Ise boun' to have a good plan."

"Boun' to have ain't is got. An' while you is gittin' it what is I an' Prob'le to be doin'?"

"Remain right where you is at."

"We is at two rooms down to the one hotel, an' that ain't decent fo' ma'ied folks."

"They is some which would think that was plumb.

heaven, Mis' Huff. But if'n you is se'ious 'bout gittin' yo' husban' cured you keep him in Bummin'-ham a while."

"Right at the hotel where that Jasmine woman is stayin' at?"

"Uh-huh! Cause'n if they's one woman in this wo'ld which he won't look at now you is heah, Florabelle or Jasmine, or whatever her name is, is that one."

"But how is I to know what you is doin', Mis' Atcherson? An' what is you gwine do fust off?"

"Fust off," retorted Mrs. Atcherson firmly, "I is gwine down to Simmie Judge's house an' make talk with him."

"Wha's he got to do with this come-to-pass?"

"He's the proprietor of the Real Nobility Theatre, which this woman has been ruinin' it, countin' she's been gittin' all the trade to the Hammond Bias' theatre."

Lustisha hesitated not upon the order of her going. She found Simmie wallowing in the Slough of Despond.

He listened skeptically. He was appreciative of Mrs. Atcherson's altruistic efforts to save him from business ruin, but he didn't believe that Hammond Bias would have been guilty of such a crude procedure as the ringing in of an impostor.

"Huh!" sizzled Lustisha. "He was wise enough to know you was fool enough not to do no 'vestigatin'."

Simmie resented the suggestion.

"What you wan's me to do?"

"Prove it up on her."

"How?"

"Write a letter to the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration."

Simmie nodded sage approval as the idea filtered with difficulty through his almost solid cranium.

"Reckon that cain't do no hahm."

"Co'se not! Will you do it?"

"Uh-huh!"

"T'night?"

"Ain't no rush."

"T'night?"—grimly.

"A'right! If'n you insis's."

By some miracle of energy he did write the letter. And to make assurance doubly sure Mrs. Atcherson also wrote to the Chicago headquarters of the Charcoal Film Corporation. And for the four days following matters proceeded with suspicious calm for the principal actors in the masquerade.

Hammond Bias congratulated Florabelle Gazelle upon the arrival of the trouble doldrums. Lustisha Atcherson, Lou Ellen Huff and Simmie Judge waited impatiently for the letter that was to confirm their suspicions. Probable trailed his wife with dumb, doglike persistence, a pleading look in his eyes. Sans ring, Probable was not an imposing figure.

"Nex' woman I sees which is young an' good-

lookin’,” vowed Mr. Huff to himself, “I is gwine staht runnin’ the other way, an’ ain’t gwine stop till come Chris’mas.”

On Thursday a stranger alighted from the Chicago to New Orleans train at the Terminal Station. He was of medium height and slender frame; he carried a Malacca cane and an imitation alligator-skin grip. His clothes were modest and pleasing — English-cut suit of black-and-white checks; socks of lavender silk; tie to match; shoes of reddish tan; hat of pearl grey.

He taxied to the Happy Hotel, where he registered simply as “Farisee Kenner, Chicago, Illinois.” He demanded the best in the house, flashed a sizable roll — and got the best. Then he bathed, donned fresh linen, summoned a second taxicab and rolled grandly to the unimposing portals of the Real Nobility Theatre. He discovered the melancholy Simmie Judge and handed that gentleman a cheap printed card:

MR. FARISEE KENNER

General Manager
Charcoal Film Corporation
Chicago, Illinois

Simmie Judge clamped his hand down on that of the stranger and expressed his unadulterated delight at the meeting.

“Wha’s all the trouble heah?” inquired Mr. Kenner.

Simmie told him, starting his story a few years before the Creation and winding up with the discovery of the supposed masquerade.

"An' what I wan's to know is," finished Simmie: "Is you got a gal actress' name' Florabelle Gazelle, or ain't you?"

Mr. Kenner smiled in superior fashion. His dignity was puncture-proof and Simmie stood off in awe.

"I is came pussonally from Chicawgo," retorted Mr. Kenner icily, "to look an' inquire into matters at fust hand. They is much regahdin' this which woul'n't be clear n'r neither apparent to you right offen the bat, even if I was to splain it. Strikes me that I had better atten' to the matters an' affairs of the immedjit future my ownse'f. Fust off, I wan's to see Miss Gazelle right away. Where c'n I fin' her at?"

"She's stoppin' down to Sally Crouch's Cozy Home Hotel. But, befo' you go I wan's to know what you wan's me to do."

"Princ'pally nothin'; said nothin' consistin' enti'ely of keepin' yo' mouth shut concernin' my preffessional 'filiations. If'n my wuk heah is to be 'fective an' bear fruit, then I is got to prese've my incogniter; an' they ain't no one to know who I is or that I is gin'ral manager of the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration — which same I is — or c'neted with same in any way. Un'erstan'?"

Mr. Judge claimed that he understood. He

promised to keep his mouth shut and did so just long enough for him to hunt up Mrs. Lustisha Atcherson and tell her the gladsome tidings. He pledged her to silence and she kept the pledge—not because it was a pledge, but because, in the nature of things, Mrs. Atcherson wanted the exquisite pleasure of stage-managing the exposure.

Meantime Farisee Kenner checked out at the Happy Hotel and registered at the Cozy Home, securing a room two doors removed from the bridal suite occupied by Miss Florabelle Gazelle. He installed himself and rambled idly into the lobby. There, hunched on a chair, he saw a gloomy-looking country negro dumbly chewing the odoriferous stump of an ex-cigar. Farisee sank into a seat beside him. He produced a gold-banded perfecto and forced it upon his dazzled companion. Probable shied nervously.

“I ain’t want to jine no lodge.”

“I ain’t no organizer,” smiled Mr. Kenner affably.

“N’r neither I don’t need no mo’ insurance.”

“I ain’t no insurance man. My name is Farisee Kenner. Ise from Chicawgo.”

At mention of Chicago Probable instinctively ducked.

“Huh! Chicawgo?”

“Yeh. Is you ’quainted there?”

“I ain’t got on’y one frien’ which comes from

Chicawgo, Mistuh Kenner, an' she's 'bout'n ten mo'n I wan's to have."

"Where did you meet her?"

"She's stoppin' in this heah ve'y hotel. It's Florabelle Gazelle, the famous pitcher actress."

"A-ah!" said Farisee. "You don't say!"

"Yassuh; I does say. I says also I is libel to be hearin' 'bout that gal fo' the res' of my nachel life an' fo ten yeahs afterwa'ds."

"You is pusson'ly 'quainted?"

"Ti'eely too pussonal."

"If'n you could intraduce me ——"

Probable Huff rose abruptly.

"If'n you is boun' to git 'traduced to that movie gal — Gawd helpin' you! — git Sally Crouch to ten' to it. She's bigger'n what I am."

Farisee acquainted himself with the immensely portly proprietress of the Cozy Home Hotel. He conscripted his most winning smile and plastered it all over his face. He fairly oozed conviviality. Ten minutes later Sally Crouch dragged Florabelle Gazelle from her room.

"Miss Gazelle, meet my frien' an' gues', Mistuh Kenner."

"D'lighted to meet up with you, Mistuh Kenner."

"All the pleasuah what they is is mine, Miss Gazelle. You is from heahabouts?"

"No. I is a No'therner."

"I hails from up yonder too."

“What paht?”

“Chicago.”

“Oh!”

Florabelle was not at all pleased to learn that she had made the acquaintance of a man who came from the city she had never seen and which she claimed as home. But, despite a quiver of apprehension, she liked the man. He was easy, suave, polished. Before she knew what she was about she had donned hat and coat and gone forth for a bit of afternoon lunch with him.

They progressed swimmingly. Fortunately for Florabelle, Mr. Kenner seemed averse to discussing Chicago. He said flatly that he disliked the city and didn't care to talk about it. Miss Gazelle was grateful for the antipathy and laid claim to a similar feeling. So they mutually decided that Chicago, as a topic of conversation, was strictly taboo. She was glad of that. She found herself irresistibly attracted to the dapper Chicagoan and would have been loath to sever their swiftly budding friendship through fear of discovery.

Mr. Kenner drew her out skilfully after first admitting that he knew very little regarding the manufacture of motion pictures, and still less about the persons who peopled them. Miss Gazelle — eager to impress — waxed bold. Her heart was acting with a strange jumpiness. She grew voluble in describing her manifold histrionic triumphs. She ransacked the storehouse of memory for such

scraps of movie vernacular and bits of professional patter as she had heard drip from the incarnadined lips of the stars for whom she had chambermaided.

By the hour of the first show at the Jim-dandy that night she was pleasantly certain that she had impressed him. Nor was she wrong. Before parting from her he made sure that she understood that they were dated up for a midnight supper after the final reception. He promised to be waiting with a taxicab.

The advent of Mr. Farisee Kenner produced an upheaval in Miss Florabelle Gazelle's cosmic scheme. She had gazed into his eyes and listened to the lilt of his voice, and trouble had taken wing and departed. In short, for the first time in her brilliant social career, Miss Jasmine-Florabelle Poston-Gazelle was feeling the preliminary pangs of deep and lasting love.

Love became an established fact during their midnight lunch. And Farisee let it be distinctly understood that, though not an impressionable chap, he found much that was seriously intriguing about Miss Gazelle.

The *affaire de cœur* progressed with amazing speed. As a courageous captain of compliments, Farisee ranked with the world's finest. He fairly swept the heretofore wary and poised Jasmine from her feet with the ardency of his wooing.

Regarding himself he vouchsafed little information, and that was of a decidedly nebulous char-

acter. He said he was a travelling man who was laying off in Birmingham for a while. And as a layer-off he was in a class by himself. But as he was sartorially perfect and perpetually moneyed no questions were asked — or answered.

Every once in a while Jasmine was brought up short in her honeyed anticipations by the embarrassing explanations inevitably necessary regarding her anomalous position in Birmingham. She wondered whether Farisee would continue to love her when he discovered she was an impostor — a mere first-class chambermaid at a fashionable-resort hotel instead of a moving-picture star. To the end of insuring his forgiveness she neglected no art in the universal catalogue of femininity that would charm him. She was on edge every minute and each hour more deeply in love.

So far as Farisee was concerned, the population of Birmingham consisted of one person — and that one transient. He had eyes for no one save Jasmine. He accompanied her nightly to the Jim-dandy Theatre, hung round her dressing room between receptions, and carted her away on auto rides and to midnight luncheons when the evening's work was completed.

During that week a firm friendship was cemented between Mr. Farisee Kenner, of Chicago, and Mr. Hammond Bias, of Birmingham. They shot pool together and chatted affably of things in general.

“If'n it wa'n't fo' the fac' that I don't know

nothin' whichsoever 'bout'n Brother Kenner," commented Hammond one night, "I'd say he was the swellest feller which is ever lived."

Meantime no less than three persons were viewing askance the sudden infatuation of Farisee and Florabelle. One was the slow-thinking Simmie Judge, of the Real Nobility Theatre; the second was Lou Ellen Huff, who was fearful that the dénouement would not come until after the exigencies of her husband's employer's business carried them back to Decatur; and the third person was the vinegary Mrs. Lustisha Atcherson.

Lustisha was bitter. And, unlike the two others, she was far from supine. When she determined upon something she usually went after it. So, after carefully watching the flaming progress of the love affair between Farisee and Florabelle, she wisely concluded that all bets were off unless the hand of Farisee was called quickly, unexpectedly and efficiently.

Whereupon, having once again taken the reins in her own hands, she made a move.

She announced that on the following Wednesday night she was giving a reception and dance in honour of the visiting celebrity — Miss Florabelle Gazelle, of the Charcoal Film Corporation.

Florabelle accepted casually. So, unsuspectingly, did Hammond Bias. And so did Farisee Kenner.

"What you plannin' to do at yo' party, Mis'

Atcherson?" queried the impatient Lou Ellen Huff.

"I is gwine do a plenty!" came the sharp answer. "An' this heah Florabelle woman is gwine be a'mighty sorry fo' same."

"I hope so," sighed Lou Ellen. "I sho'ly does."

Lustisha glanced sharply toward her. "You is plumb shuah they ain't no mistake 'bout'n this gal bein' the Jasmine Poston which visited up to Decatur?"

Lou Ellen sniffed. "Mebbe a man like what Pro'ble is c'n be fooled, but not no woman. She c'n wamp him, Mis' Atcherson; but she cain't wamp me. I done knows!"

Lustisha went happily ahead with her arrangements. She placed the catering in the hands of the efficient Sally Crouch. And she egged Simmie on to quiz Farisee. As to that, she might as well have attempted to build an automobile with a cheese box and three spools. Simmie's maladroit questions were turned deftly aside by the suave and affable Farisee, whose poise matched that of the incomparable Jasmine.

Simmie knew Farisee was making sport of him and Simmie grew exceedingly peeved. Whereupon he made the grievous error of telling his sympathetic wife of the drama due for an early staging.

Mr. Simmie immediately told the story in amplified form and strictest confidence to Mrs. Pliny Driver, and Mrs. Pliny transmitted it to Sis' Callie Flukers. Flooie! Sis' Callie got her second wind

after the fifth recountal and from then on travelled tirelessly from house to house. By the time she finished, the story was garbled but the impression unified. At the handsome home of Mrs. Lustisha Atcherson on Wednesday night a bombshell was to be neatly placed under the chair of Miss Florabelle Gazelle and expeditiously exploded. From the moment the acid waggy tongue of Sis' Callie Flukers got into the game a record attendance at the Atcherson festivities was a certainty.

But the talebearing of the loquacious and elastically veracious Callie Flukers had a far-reaching effect, which that gossipy lady had failed to anticipate. In due time the unexpurgated story reached the shocked ears of Mr. Hammond Bias, proprietor of the Jim-dandy Theatre. Mr. Bias proceeded to rise high in the air and remain there.

His first move was to enter unceremoniously the room of Florabelle Gazelle at the Cozy Home Hotel, sling his hat viciously into a corner and himself into an easy chair.

"Git busy!" he commanded.

She looked up in surprise.

"Says which?"

"I says git busy!" he roared, his urbanity gone. "An' when I says it I means it. An' what I means is that you is got to staht right heah an now packin' yo' luggage."

Florabelle seated herself with engaging calm.

"W..."

“’Cause you is leavin’ fo’ Jacksonville tomorry afternoon.”

“ Who says so? ”

“ I does.”

“ Is sumthin’ went wrong? ”

“ Huh! ” ejaculated Mr. Bias with heavy irony. “ Lis’en at the woman astin’ me, ‘ Is sumthin’ went wrong?’ Jes’ lis’en at her, will you? No, Miss Florabelle Gazelle which was, they ain’t sumthin’ went wrong a-tall; they is jes’ ev’rythin’ went wrong! ”

“ How come? ”

The aplomb of Miss Gazelle was vastly annoying to the visibly perturbed Mr. Bias. He did not know that love had transported her to Olympian heights and that she was — temporarily at least — far, far removed from the worries of this sordid mundane sphere. Mr. Bias grabbed at his shock of hair with trembling fingers.

“ Right heah an’ now, Miss Florabelle Gazelle, you ceases an’ stops bein’ the woman which you ain’t an’ becomes the woman which you is. Also, I wishes to say a few wo’ds ’bout’n this heah Mistuh Farisee Kenner, of Chicawgo, which if he heard me he could have me ’rested fo’ criminal liable.”

Florabelle froze up.

“ Mr. Kenner is my gen’leman frien’.”

“ I reckon you knows all what they is to know ’bout’n this heah Mistuh Kenner — huh? ”

“ I reckon I does.”

"Yeh; an', b'lieve me, you on'y reckons. 'Cause I know you ain't know nothin'. Not nothin' a-tall! If'n you did yo'd of done took a ax to him long ago. Does you know who he is an' what he does fo' a livin'?"

"He's a travellin' man, an'——"

"Lis'en heah at me, cullud gal; an' lis'en attentive! Yo' ve'y good frien', Mistuh Farisee Kenner, is been makin' a monkey outen you. 'Cause why? 'Cause'n Mistuh Farisee Kenner ain't nothin' on'y the gin'ral manager of the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration of Chicawgo! Now what is you got to say?"

It became immediately evident that Miss Poston had nothing to say. The tidings slammed against her mental midriff and she sank limply on the bed.

"Huh?"

Whereupon Mr. Hammond Bias proceeded to cast forth the whole lurid story of Mr. Kenner's perfidy, winding up with a vivid recital of the trap that had been laid in the setting of the Atcherson dance.

He mopped his forehead with a pink silk handkerchief.

"Ev'ybody is been egged on," he continued heatedly, "by her an' that Lou Ellen woman. I reckon you di'n't even know that she done went an' ma'ied Prob'le Huff the day you left Decatur; an' tha's what brung her down heah when she heard you was wampin' him."

Jasmine shrugged wearily.

"I ain't keer who is ma'ied to him —'ceptin' on'y that I is sorry fo' her."

"Anyways," raged Mr. Bias, "it was Lustisha Atcherson which made Simmie Judge write off to them Cha'coal people. An', jes' to make shuah that they wa'n't gwine be no slip, Lustisha does the same; an' also, too, she sen's them yo' pitcher fo' lagniappe.

"An' t'morry night, at the Atcherson dance, Lou Ellen is gwine 'cuse you of bein' a fake, which yo' real name is Jasmine Poston; an' they is gwine call on Farisee Kenner to prove that you ain't what you says you is. An' when he gits done provin' it up on you they ain't be 'nough lef' of Florabelle Gazelle to make a dish of breakfas' food outen."

She extended her hands. "Well ——"

"They is on'y one thing fo' you to do; an' you is got to do that quick, an' also fast. That is, beat it! Git out! Lose yo'se'f! Disappear away from Bummin'ham!"

Something snapped within Jasmine Poston. She had, for the first time in her life, fallen in love. And now she was tasting its pain. She sat motionless, wordless. She caused the raw nerves of Mr. Bias to jangle discordantly.

"Say-sumthin'!" he yelled. "An' do sumthin'!"

Her voice seemed to come from a distance.

"I ain't got nothin' to say, Mistuh Bias. An' neither I ain't gwine do nothin'."

"What kin' of foolish talk is you makin' now?"

"I says I ain't gwine git outen Bummin'ham; an' also I is gwine to Lustisha Atcherson's dance t'morry night!"

Hammond Bias raved. He ranted. He extracted tufts of hair. He anathematized the mentality of women in general and Jasmine's in particular. He scolded, threatened, cajoled. But she was adamant.

"A'right, cullud gal! You says you ain't gwine beat it an' git away from Bummin'ham, does you? You says you is gwine go to Lustisha Atcherson's dance an' take what is comin' to you? You is gwine do that, huh? Well, then, lis'en heah at what I is sayin'. I is sayin' this — as follows: I is gwine be there too; an' when they busts that bum' under you I is gwine be sore as the nex' one, an' I is gwine riz up against you an' say that you fooled me too. I is gwine 'cuse you of bein' as much of a impostor with me as you is been with ev'ybody else. An' if'n they wan's to 'rest your I is gwine subscribe to the warrant. 'Git that?"

"Yes," she answered dully; "I git it!"

"An' case'n you blames me ——"

"I ain't blamin' you fo' nothin'."

"Tha's mighty good, 'cause blamin' me ain't gwine git you nothin' nohow. I is gave you fair wa'nin' an' I is offrin' to buy yo' ticket fo' Jacksonville. Now I asts you las' time an' fo' all: Is you gwine to Flo'ida or is you gwine remain heah

where you is at to make a bigger fool outen yo'se'f than what the Lawd intended?"

"I reckon I is gwine stay an' play fool," she answered mordantly.

He opened the door and launched a parting dart:

"An' I is gwine he'p!" he roared. "B'lieve me, I is!"

There was little sleep that night for the erst-while Florabelle Gazelle. She tossed on her bed, staring wide-eyed through the window toward the serried sky line vaguely limned in the effulgence of the full moon.

Discovery! Exposure! Both would have appeared trivial save for the sinister rôle in which Farisee Kenner was cast. That hurt — hurt to the quick. She had no censure for Hammond Bias. He had treated her squarely to the last.

Farisee! He had duped her. There had been malice behind it. And she had been fool enough to fancy that he had given of himself as fully and freely as had she of herself. During all her rack-ing thought the idea of avoiding the dance on the following night did not occur to her.

If Farisee found pleasure in hurting her publicly, then she was determined that he should be robbed of not one iota of that pleasure. She would go. She would face exposure and the ensuing contempt of the coloured populace. She found grim satisfaction in the martyr rôle.

Toward morning Jasmine dozed. She dozed fit-

fully, her sleep broken by nightmare. She remained in her room during the day. Farisee stopped at the hotel and asked to see her. She pleaded headache and refused him. He sent a word of inquiry as to whether she intended putting in an appearance at the Atcherson dance. She notified him that she did.

She went. She drove regally from the Cozy Home Hotel to the Atcherson domicile in Clarence Carter's seven-passenger taxicab. She was dressed in her best. For two hours she had laboured to present the best appearance possible. She purposely arrived a trifle late.

The big ramshackle frame structure was ablaze with light and surging with strained hilarity as she alighted from the taxi and made her way to the veranda, to be greeted with suspicious effusiveness by Lustisha Atcherson. She glanced about the living room with eyes in which there was an unnatural brightness.

There was an audible hush as Jasmine entered the room. Her eyes scanned the crowd swiftly. In a far corner she saw Lou Ellen Huff, smugly standing guard over her stiffly starched and thoroughly miserable bridegroom. Near the punch bowl was Hammond Bias, a deep frown corrugating his brow. He paused between each pair of disappointingly innocuous drinks to run a trembly finger between collar and neck.

From out the crowd at the front door Farisee

Kenner emerged. He was resplendent in the glory of full evening dress. His clothes shrieked their immaculateness from many-fluted shirt to patent-leather pumps polished to the ultimate. He crossed to Jasmine, lips smiling, hand extended.

Her pose more than matched his. Their hands met — his warm and hearty; hers cold and clammy.

“Evenin’, Miss Gazelle.”

“Evenin’, Mistuh Kenner.”

“Yo’ headache is some better, I trus’.”

“It’s tol’able well.”

“I been ’fraid mebbe you woul’n’t git to come.”

“I never had no idee of not comin’.”

She was searching his face with her eyes. It was hard to believe that this man was planning her undoing. The guests were hanging on every word and gesture with a keen morbidity of interest.

“Does you feel like dancin’, Miss Gazelle?”

“I suttinly does,” lied she bravely.

The music blared; his arms went round her; they whirled across the floor in an intricate fox trot.

Throughout the evening they were together, their conversation strictly impersonal. Hammond Bias watched them with hawklike intentness. He didn’t understand. Mrs. Lustisha Atcherson grew nervous. She watched for her opportunity, and when it came she grabbed it.

A dance ended. Farisee escorted Jasmine to the

punch bowl, where ice floated in a sea of grape lemonade. Probable was there under the iron chaperonage of his bride. And Simmie Judge was immediately behind them. Mrs. Lustisha swept down upon the tableau, a dozen or more guests trailing interestedly in her wake. She pulled up short before Jasmine.

The girl looked up, met the coldly glittering eyes of her hostess, and knew that she was face to face with a climax — the climax! She steeled herself for the ordeal. She even smiled.

Hammond Bias, scenting action, drifted uncertainly to midstage. Mrs. Atcherson surveyed the guest of honour with open hostility. Then her high-pitched nasal voice cut through the chatter, stilling it instantly:

“Miss Gazelle?”

“Yes’m?”

“Somebody is been tellin’ lies on you.”

Jasmine shrugged. “I ain’t keer pretickerlely what other folks says ’bout’n me.”

“You oughter care. An’ as fo’ me; I keers, countin’ you is my gues’; an’ the woman which is been spreadin’ them tales ’bout’n you is my gues’ also.”

“Name which?” inquired Jasmine, with just the correct degree of interest.

Lustisha triumphantly designated Lou Ellen.

“Mis’ Prob’le Huff, from Decatur, Alabama.”

Jasmine looked Lou Ellen over slowly and contemptuously. Then she turned back to Lustisha and smiled.

“Her! It don’t make no diff’ence to me what a woman like’n to her says.”

That was Lou Ellen’s cue and she rose to the occasion, face flaming belligerence. Probable Huff tugged weakly at her skirt; but she shook him off. Her eyes bored into Jasmine’s across the punch bowl.

“You ain’t keer what a woman like’n to what I is says ’bout’n you, huh?”

“Tha’s it zac’ly!”

“You ain’t keer?” Lou Ellen flung round, faced the crowd for a second, and then swung back to Jasmine. “What yo’ name is, gal?”

Jasmine arched her eyebrows.

“Ain’t yo’ hearin’ good? Or is yo’ understandin’ as foolish as yo’ face?”

“Wha’s yo’ name? I asts you that question plain black on white.”

“My name,” returned Jasmine softly, “is Florabelle Gazelle, of Chicawgo! I is stah of the Cha’-coal Fillum Co’p’ration!” Lustisha inhaled sharply. Hammond Bias gave a wild despairing tug at his wilted collar and muttered profanity. Probable Huff sibilated into his wife’s ear: “See? I done tol’ you so.”

“Florabelle Gazelle, is it? Is you plumb shuah?”

"Reckon I is."

"Well, then, answer me this: Is you ever hearn tell of a gal name' Jasmine Poston?"

Jasmine's poise was magnificent. She shook her head thoughtfully.

"Movin'-pitcher actress?"

"No; she jes' says she's one!"

"An' she ain't really one?"

"No," snapped Lou Ellen Huff; "she ain't really one. But she is got a whole lot of folks thinkin' she is. She's tellin' folks that her name is Florabelle Gazelle!"

For three ticks of the clock there was nothing to be heard in the room but silence. Then there was a rustling as the awkward spectators fidgeted nervously. Jasmine stared fixedly at her inquisitor, threw back her head — and laughed! Laughed ringingly!

"Somebody is been slippin' some happy dus' in yo' coffee, Mis' Huff."

"I asts you this, which you ain't never answered: Is you Jasmine Poston or ain't you Jasmine Poston?"

Florabelle turned away disdainfully.

"I ain't useter makin' talk with wimmin which ain't ladies, Mis' Huff." Then her eyes met those of Lustisha Atcherson: "N'r neither, Mis' Atcherson, I ain't useter bein' treated like'n to this when I is a gues' at a pa'ty."

Lustisha extended a restraining hand.

"Jes' a minute, Miss Whichever-yo'-name-is. Jes' one li'l' teeny minute!"

Jasmine inspected her hostess coldly.

"Well? What is you got to say with yo' mouth?"

"Jes' this," snarled Lustisha: "You says you is Florabelle Gazelle, which ac's fo' the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration. Mis' Huff says you ain't her, but is somebody else. As yo' hostess, I is responsible to my other gues's fo' you. An' they happens to be one gues' heah which c'n prove what is which. Ladies an' gen'lemen, I wan's to pernounce that this heah Mistuh Farisee Kenner, of Chicawgo, ain't nothin' mo' nor less than the gin'ral manager of the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration, which this lady heah says she wuks fo'. Ain't that the truth, Mistuh Kenner?"

Farisee nodded gravely. His face was pokerishly inscrutable.

"It suttinly is."

"Well now, Mistuh Kenner, I asts you in all honesty: Is this gal Florabelle Gazelle an' does she wuk fo' the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration?"

The crowd surged closer. Jasmine seemed to stop breathing. She half closed her eyes for the impact.

Farisee's lips expanded into a smile. He met Jasmine's eyes triumphantly. He shrugged.

"Miss Gazelle?" he answered. "Of co'se she is a member of the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration!"

An' the on'y reason I ain't never said so befo' is that we been dickerin' over the terms of her new contrac' fo' nex' yeah. She's one of our mos' prominent actresses!"

The following morning, in her rooms at the Cozy Home Hotel, Miss Florabelle Gazelle entertained a visitor. The visitor was Lou Ellen Huff. Lou Ellen was tearfully contrite.

"The mail is jes' came in from Decatur, Miss Gazelle," said she, "an' in it was my husban's ring an' a letter regahdin' same. An' they come from Jacksonville, which proves that you is the woman which you is an' not the one which you ain't. An' I also wan's to say that I never had no real doubts 'bout'n you bein' Florabelle Gazelle — on'y that Atcherson woman kept eggin' me on. You b'lieves what I says, don't you?"

Jasmine smiled happily.

"When a woman marries a man like'n to him you is ma'ied, Mis' Huff, Ise willin' to b'lieve anything she says."

Lou Ellen departed for the arms of her forgiving husband. A few minutes later there came a light tap on the door and Mr. Farisee Kenner, of Chicago, entered the room. He was smiling broadly.

"I doné it!" he announced.

"Done which?"

"I went to see Hammond Bias an' had a talk with him. I showed him I been holdin' ev'y ace

in the deck; an' so he has signed up to take two pitchers a month fo' two yeahs from the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration. You see, we is been tryin' fo' the longes' time to git bookin's thoo the South; but they wa'n't a thing stirrin'. Then we begin gittin' letters from Bummin'ham 'bout'n you — an' yo' pitcher, which showed you had a screen face.

“Ordinary we could jes' have wrote, sayin' you wa'n't in our comp'ny. But we knowed that somebody was givin' us the finest kind of advertisin' what is, an' I come down my ownse'f to see coul'n't I use that to open this valu'ble te'itory fo' our pitchers.

“Mistuh Bias' order stahts things off. Pretty soon we is gwine be exhibitin' all over the South. So the trip is been real profitable from a business stan'p'int.”

“An' it was business which made you tell them I was a actress in yo' comp'ny?”

“No,” he answered, with momentary seriousness. Then his face lightened. “It's gwine be the truth if'n you wan's it so. Yo'd make a swell actress.”

“You means you wan's to sign me up?”

“Shuah do! Co'se I ain't got no powers to write no contrac'——”

“Gin'ral manager?”

He laughed loudly.

“Huh! I ain't no mo' gin'ral manager than what you is, Florabelle Gazelle. But when they sent me down heah I figgered it out they wa'n't

no use in these folks knowin' I wa'n't somethin' real big; so I had them gin'ral manager ca'ds printed while I was waitin' betwix' trains up to Cinsnatti. An' b'lieve me, it was one mo' heap of fun!"

"B-b-but," stammered Jasmine, "if'n you ain't the gin'ral manager, which is you?"

"I is Mistuh Farisee Kenner, a member of the sales fo'ce of the Cha'coal Fillum Co'p'ration. An' it strikes me, Jasmine, that, us both lovin' each other an' pretendin' to be somebody which we neither ain't——"

She hung her head shyly.

"I reckon," said she, "that I an' you ought to be mighty successful in makin' people believe we is folks!"

THE LIGHT BOMBASTIC TOE

THE wide tree-lined street was deserted. The clear warmish rays of a midafternoon October sun cast a golden-gossamer radiance over the shingle roofs of the unpretentious one-story houses which sentineled the thoroughfare. A mile due north the dozen ambitious office buildings which mark Birmingham's civic centre jutted starkly into the smoke-laden air. Then from that direction appeared a slowly moving object—a hopelessly dilapidated cart drawn by a ramshackle and languorous mule. It came into view from a side street and shambled out of sight. A trolley rounded the corner at Magnolia Point, rattled lazily northward and jangled from view.

Then Quintus Weefalls happened!

He happened suddenly. A moment before the street had been deserted; it was now populated. It would have been hard to say where he came from or how he got there, but there he was, hoofing it northward in a manner which betokened equal parts of unplumbable dignity and haunting haste. He did not glance round to see if he was observed, but his manner plainly indicated that he wanted to and dared not.

It was beneath the dignity of Quintus Weefalls

to look behind. Quintus' dignity was a quality superb. He had raised it from a sproutling to magnificent maturity and it was not lightly to be set aside, even when its possessor was apprehensive — and Quintus was all of that.

He pedalled over the paving of Twenty-third Street with an absolute maximum of commensurate speed. Yet he did not move so swiftly as to disturb a single perfect detail of his sartorial elegance. A velour hat of deep slate grey perched on the side of his head at the precisely correct angle, setting off the rich milk chocolate of his complexion to best advantage. His three-piece suit was of a quiet grey that matched the hat. His silk shirt, too, was grey and he sported a soft collar of the same shade. The flaring scarf that served as resting place for what almost looked like a blood ruby was also of grey. Quintus looked not unlike a rising storm. He was aggressively debonair. Only the fact that he kept a tight grip upon his silver-handled cane instead of twirling it with airy insouciance gave evidence that he was mentally perturbed.

This was Quintus' third trip of the day in this direction. But it was the first that had given rise to perturbation. First time out he had gone to the corner grocery for fifteen cents' worth of bananas for strictly personal consumption. His second journey had carried him on a business matter to the Maizquint Dancing Palace, which was op-

erated jointly by Mr. Quintus Weefalls and — so Darktown had been given to understand — Miss Maizy Battel.

On neither of those trips — both of which had carried him over the very ground he was now traversing — had he experienced any qualms as to the possibilities of discovery.

But now it was different. Quintus Weefalls was about to visit a woman; he was about to pay an informal call upon Miss Maizy Battel, his business partner.

There was adequate reason for secrecy, for the coloured population of Birmingham did not know that Miss Maizy Battel was in reality Mrs. Quintus Weefalls. Quintus and Maizy had been married for more than two years. For business reasons, reasons which appeared to them as good and sufficient, they had kept the fact of their matrimony secret since arriving in Birmingham.

Wherefore Quintus' visits to his wife were strictly sub rosa affairs. A shadow fell suddenly across his starboard bow and he ducked instinctively, then sighed as he spotted its owner — an overgrown and very dark youngster whose ball had travelled through a hole in the fence toward the other side of the street. Only a kid; but Quintus slackened pace perceptibly until he was quite sure that the lad had returned to the oblivion of his pleasures.

Quintus progressed another half block. He

paused before a pretty little bungalow, unblushingly glanced round to make quite sure that he was not observed, and —

Quintus Weefalls ceased to be. He ceased to be on the street. As suddenly as he had appeared, just so suddenly did he vanish. He didn't turn into the yard and go thence into the house. He simply vanished.

Maizy Battel was alone. That too was as he had planned. He perched his velour hat carefully upon the silver head of his grey cane, propped the combination in a corner, mopped his perspiring forehead with a slate-coloured silk handkerchief and heaved a profound sigh.

"Wigglin' dill pickles!" he ejaculated. "Ise bettin' somebody done saw me."

Maizy rose and languidly shook out the caressing folds of an expensive pink crêpe-de-chine negligée. She was unusually good to look upon; a very light-brown study in the ultimate perfections of the Southern Afro-American. She crossed the room, placed plump dimpled arms about the neck of the slender and immaculate Quintus and kissed him possessively upon the lips.

"Hon," said she, "I mos' thought you wa'n't ever comin'."

He returned her kiss fervently.

"Well, Ise heah."

"Glo' be! An' you looks wo'ied."

"Huh! You suttinly spoke a mouthful that

time, sweetness. When you remahks wo'ied bouten me you ain't on'y began to talk."

"What you is wo'ied 'bout?"

"Ast me sumthin' easy. Ast me what I ain't wo'ied 'bout?"

"Our dancin' 'cademy?"

"That comes second, sweetness. Fust off an' mos' fo'mos' is that I is done sick an' ti'ed of pretendin' that I an' you ain't ma'ied."

"We is ma'ied," returned Maizy practically.

"Is ma'ied don' do us no good if'n we is got to live in sep'rate houses an' be perlite to each other like'n to if we was on'y jes' frien's."

"It was yo' idea, Quintus."

"Shuah it was my idea. It was my idea to come down to Bummin'ham in the fust place. But them ideas was both rotten an' neither one ain't he'pin' me none now. Lis'en, hon! How 'bout I an' you tellin' these Bummin'ham folks we is ma'ied an' is been ma'ied fo' mo'n two yeahs?"

She shook her head in slow negation.

"No-o! That'd never do. They ain't none of them would understan' why we is been foolin' them by sayin' we ain't ma'ied when we is."

"Mebbe so. But it jes' posituvely ain't decent fo' a ma'ied man to have to go sneakin' roun' like a crimernal to see his ve'y own wife. Like you says — but," his brow creased with thought, "hol' on! I feel's if I was gwine have a idea."

"Yeh?" She brightened.

"I got it!"

"Tell which?"

"We c'n go git us a license an' git ma'ied again!"

"No-o, Quintus, we cain't do that!"

"How come not?"

"It'd be bigamy!"

A large portion of silence ensued.

"Jes' like all my other schemes," he grunted miserably. "Lis'ens good ontill you heah how it soun's."

"Besides," she consoled, "'ceptin' on'y that it's incumvenient an' hasn't worked, the idea bouten you an' me pretendin' that we ain't ma'ied is a good one—a ve'y good one. You is a han'some man, an' 'trac's all the gals to the Maizquint Dancin' Palace, an' I gits the young men to come, 'countin' they likes my class."

"The Maizquint! Huh! The Maizquint, hon, is jes' about ain't to be. Somebody done slipped a ton of nitric glyc'rin under it an' blew that an' all my swell ideas highern' Haman."

"But that don' prove the scheme ain't good," she defended stoutly.

"Oh! You is been 'tractin' the men all right, Maizy, an' they is been comin' to dancin' school right reg'lar—sometimes. I ain't got no kick comin' on that. An' I admits that if'n they knowed you was a ma'ied woman they woul'n't come so frequent. It's me which is fell down on the job. I guess I is los' my knack with the gals sence I

went and got ma'ied, cause'n they ain't hahdly one of 'em which comes to the Maizquint no mo'. An' when gals don't come there they ain't no men comin' neither."

Maizy sidled closer to her husband and he slipped his hand about her waist.

"Ev'rything's gwine tu'n out all right, sweetness boy. Somebody was tellin' me today that Sunshine Elliott said she was comin' back to dancin' school soon, an' you know well as me that if'n she does the whole Rosebud Beautifyin' Sassiety is comin' with her an' them's the pretties' an' 'tractivees' cullud gals in town, an'——"

"Sunshine Elliott ain't never comin' to no mo' dancin' classes," he postulated lugubriously.

"But if'n she did?"

"If'n she did ain't is gwine. We is saw the las' of Sunshine Elliott in the Maizquint."

"Sumthin' wrong?"

"Ev'rything."

"Name which?"

"Her pa."

"He ain't want her to dance?"

"Wuss'n that — heaps wuss. He is always wanted she shoul'n't dance ever sence we opened up heah th'ee months ago. She wan'ed to dance, an' so her an' him kept a-fightin' over it until he fin'ly decided that the bes' way he could settle the prob- lum was to git rid of I an' you an' the Maizquint in one gran' bust-up."

Her eyes narrowed and lips pressed to a straight red line. "He's done bit off a pow'ful large bite, Quintus. An' why he is gone an' got so wicious all of a suddin?"

"S'mo of my swell schemin', Maizy. He thinks I an' his gal is in love with each other an' he is 'fraid she is gwine ma'y me. He wants she should ma'y Cass Driggers."

"So-o-o! But jes' thinkin' that an' bein' sore at you don' give him no power to run us out of town."

"Yeh, it do."

"'Splain which."

"He's pow'ful rich an' inflamental an' he's on'y jes' recent been 'lected Gran' Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise."

"You don' say!"

"Yeh! I does say. An' they ain't hahdly cullud man or woman in Bummin'ham which ain't belong to that lodge. No matter which else they belongs to, they belongs to The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise."

"Ain't it the truth?"

"Well, the lodge went an' had a meetin' las' night!"

"Yeh?"

"An'"—Quintus leaned forward tensely in his chair, long slender fingers interlocked tightly, eyes holding hers fixedly—"that li'l', ol', no-'count pa of Sunshine's went an' 'traded a motion which

says that The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise is ag'in dancin' an' all members is prohibited they-from!"

"No!" she cried in incredulous horror.

"Yeh! An' wuss'n that they passed the fust two readin's at las' night's meetin' an' it comes up fo' a final readin' nex' Monday night."

"Mebbe so it won't pass."

"Huh! Mebbe so we is gwine have snow on the Fo'th of July. With that ol' muskeeter buzzin' behin' that motion they ain't nary chance it won't pass. An' they's mo' additional reasons than that too."

"Which?"

"The hall which we is rentin' fo' the Maizquint Dancin' Palace is a ol' skatin' rink which wa'n't hardly wuth the lumber which was in it ontill we come along. It was about the deadest piece of propitty which they is in Bummin'ham. An' ol' Semore Mashby owns it.

"Well, I is been inquiren' a few questions right recent an' I is foun' out that the cullud folks heah don' love Semore Mashby no mo'n they loves the devil in a red suit, and they ain't nothin' which makes 'em happier'n to see Semore git stung. An' contrariwise, they ain't nothin' which makes 'em mo' mis'able than to see Semore makin' mo' money to add to the too much what he is a'ready got. An' by rentin' the ol' skatin' rink from Semore we is jes' nachelly puttin' money in his pockets, and if'n

the Maizquint goes bust he gits stang an' ev'body'd have good cause to laugh at him. So even if'n they wa'n't no special feelin' against us I think the lodge'd vote against the Maizquint jes' 'countin' it'd hurt Semore Mashby."

"Looks as if we is gittin' the dirty end of the deal all round, Quintus."

"Looks as if' is right. Me — I wisht I was back to Je'sey City again. 'Tain't nothin' on beauty, but cullud folks is diff'ent. They is broader an' not so narrow. An' Maizy, is you stopped an' paused to think where I an' you is gwine be at when The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise goes on reco'd as bein' ag'in dancin'? Is you? I asts you that!"

She passed a weary hand across her forehead.

"I ain't hahdly had a chance to git sta'ted thinkin' yet, Quintus."

"Now's a good time to begin, 'countin' we ain't got much longer heah in Bummin'ham. Me an' you, Maizy, is up ag'in it 'bout as hahd as two cullud folks ever does git. Mebbe so we is tried bein' too swollen up. Anyways, we is sank all our money in this heah thing an' now we is went flooie. Dan'el in the li'ns' den was a happy man compared by me."

"But he di'n't git et up."

"That's where I an' Dan'el is diff'ent. I an' you is gwine git et up so prompt that what the whale done to Jonah ain't gwine look like nothin'

on'y a salid co'se. Ev'y swell cullud pusson in town belongs to The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, an' they ain't many of 'em comin' to the Maizquint now. When them which is comin' don' come no mo' they ain't nothin' lef' fo' us to do 'cept pawn some of the stuff which we has, but two railroad tickets an' travel until the conductor makes us git off."

Maizy cogitated intensively. The immediate future was shot through with dark brown gloom. She crossed one knee over the other and displayed a liberal expanse of sheer silken hosiery, royal purple in hue. Finally she looked upon her fashion-plate husband.

"You is a pow'ful han'some man, Quintus."

"'Tain't buyin' me no di'min' rings."

"But it might."

"I ain't trus' good looks no mo'."

"Sunshine Elliott likes you a heap."

"Yeh, an' that's wha's got her pa — ol' Belshazzer Elliott — scratchin' gravel so hahd. He's done got it in his haid that she likes me too much."

"Whyn't you make her?"

"Me? A ma'ied man?"

"They ain't no distrust' betwix' I an' you, honey boy. Even if his ol' lodge does go against us, if'n we c'n git her to patronizin' us an' bringin' the Rosebud Beautifyin' Sassiety with her, which she is president of, things woul'n't be so dahk."

He shook his head.

“They ain’t nary chance. Nothin’ fo’ the Maizquint to do ’cept order a cemiterry lot an’ a nice white tombstone an’ write on it: ‘Died hahd but died complete.’”

“They ain’t no reason why you cain’t be mighty sweet to Sunshine.”

“’Tain’t that, Maizy. Bein’ nice to Sunshine ain’t the difficultes’ thing which they is in the world. She’s pretty an’ she’s young. P’int is, it ain’t gwine git us nowhere.”

“Jes’ the same, Quintus, you promise me you is gwine do as I asts.”

“All right, cumsider I is done promised. We is still facin’ the question which says, how is we gwine eat after the Maizquint closes up on us?”

“Yeh, we sho’ is got to eat.”

“Co’s e we is got a li’l money lef’——”

She looked up sharply.

“You is done got an idea in yo’ haid, Quintus,” she accused.

“Tha’s the truth, hon, but I is scared to mention it. My ideas is been workin’ out foolish right recent. It was my idea which brung us down heah from Jersey City an’ it was my idea not to let on that we was ma’ied.”

Maizy crossed the room, seated herself on the arm of his chair and ran her fingers caressingly over her husband’s cheek.

“There now, big boy, you is the ve’y swelles’ husban’ a gal ever had, an’ the ideas which you

gits is the best which is. You jes' come right out an' splain me this new idea of yourn."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"I don't want to, Maizy, cause'n you is gwine say it's a good idea, whether you think 'tis or 'tain't. An' it's gwine fliivver jes' sho's hell's covered over with red-hot gol' dollars."

"You lemme heah what 'tis."

"An' you ain't gwine say it's a good idea less'n you honest'-t'-Gawd think so?"

"Cross my heart."

Quintus took a fresh grip on his waning courage. He cleared his throat and looked everywhere in the room save at his ravishing young wife.

"Ever heah of Gadsden?"

She gazed at him reproachfully.

"Is you fo'got that I was raised in Montgomery same as you was? Co'se I know 'bout Gadsden. It's somewhea betwix heah an' Chattanooga on the Queen and Crescent."

"That's right, Maizy. You is the knowines' gal. Anyway, Gadsden is a pow'ful fine town."

"I is heard tell such."

"An' they is plenty swell cullud folks there."

"Sho' nuff?"

"Yeh. An' 'twouldn't cos' much fo' us to git located in Gadsden."

"Ain't you tootin'?"

"An' Boston Marble is been tellin' me they is

a good hall up yonder which we could rent cheap."

Maizy wound enthusiastic arms about the neck of Quintus Weefalls and implanted a moist and admiring kiss upon his forehead.

"You is the mos' ve'y wonderfules' man, Quintus. We ain't hahdly go bust heah befo' you fixes up fo' us to make a heap of money over to Gadsden."

"Huh!" he quoth pessimistically. "Lose all what we is got lef', you mean. I is the bummes' schemer which is."

"This is a good scheme," asserted Maizy. Her eyes were shining with delight at this new vista of prosperity. She was a natural devotee of Terpsichore and loath to part company with the profession. True, their attempt in Birmingham had placed very few dollars on the credit side of the ledger, but it had brought her to a position of such distinct and unassailable prestige that she looked frowningly upon any plan which had to do with an early return to Jersey City and a resumption of domestic duties in the household of another and whiter family.

"Soun's fine, Quintus."

"Soun's fine ain't is fine. An' I is preclaimin' one thing right heah an' now, Maizy: When us goes to Gadsden we goes as the man an' wife which we is. We has had had luck ever since we hit Bummin'ham 'countin' we tol' folks we wa'n't nothin' to each other on'y dancin' partners."

She kissed him again.

"I ain't never made no 'jections to bein' knew as yo' wife, is I?"

He was silent for a time, busy with reflections.

"Boston Marble was sayin' that if'n I wan's this here hall up to Gadsden I'd better ac' quick. An' with ol' man Belshazzer Elliott puttin' the skids under us nex' Monday night by havin' The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise write it down in they reco'ds that they is ag'in dancin', well ——" He shrugged expressively.

"You is goin' up to Gadsden tomorrow, Quintus!" said his wife positively.

"But ——"

"They ain't no buts bouten it. T'morrow you is goin' an' tha's all what they is to it."

He shook his head.

"Huh! Maizy, I reckon if'n you is got yo' min' made up they ain't no use argifyin'."

They discussed the proposition from every angle and saw in it a forlorn chance of saving something from the wreckage. Not so roseate as the Birmingham vista had been, it was yet better than anything else that occurred to them.

It had been a wildcat scheme from the outset and could have originated nowhere save in the happy-go-lucky brain of Quintus Weefalls. Quintus was the original and permanent world's champion in seeking the rose paths of life. He could argue a confirmed sceptic into believing his most

hare-brained scheme foolproof. And really the conception of the Maizquint had not been bad.

Quintus and Maizy, when cornered, admitted that they had been born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama. There they had met, mutually wooed and, with equal mutuality, wed. Once safely married, it was a case of spontaneous combustion. Montgomery was entirely too confined for their cosmopolitan personalities and so they fared northward and wound up in Jersey City, where they took on a superurban polish in record-breaking time. Thereafter they developed undeniable skill as dancers, took note of their extremely pleasing voices and served four months in the chorus of a negro musical-comedy tabloid.

But, being of the South, they turned yearning eyes southward. Of what use, they argued, all this veneer without opportunity to exhibit it before their less fortunate fellows? Both knew considerable of Birmingham and of dancing. They decided to exploit the former with the latter. So to Birmingham they came, bursting with optimism and possessed of seemingly adequate capital. They leased the skating rink from Semore Mashby at a rental that filled them with delight and brought songs of gladness to the parsimonious soul of Semore, on whose hands the hall had long rested as a white elephant.

Their scheme had been cursed from the outset. The little flurry of interest and success that at-

tended the opening died soon. Investigation made plain that the trouble was in the Elliott household, for between father and daughter lay the weakness and the strength of the Maizquint.

Quintus and Maizy talked it over and decided that the best course was a siege at the heart of eighteen-year-old Sunshine Elliott. Sunshine responded readily enough. She was fond of ultra-modern dancing and frankly in awe of the metropolitan aplomb of Quintus and his dancing partner. And as president of the Rosebud Beautifying Society, Sunshine brought with her for a brief week the membership thereof, and necessarily the coloured youth attended that they might trip the light fantastic with their especial lady friends.

All of which caused Elliott père to become royally peeved. Belshazzer fondly desired to see his one and only daughter safely united in the holy bonds of matrimony to Cass Driggers, the dark brown young gentleman who by profession was first aider to distressed automobiles. And he was fearful that Sunshine had succumbed to the scintillant charms of Quintus.

Belshazzer's opinion of any masculine person who made — or attempted to make — a living by sliding large feet over a polished floor to a jazzy accompaniment was not flattering. He forbade Sunshine's attendance at the Maizquint. She remained away and the Rosebud Beautifying Society followed her lead. The dancing business went to

pot. Then Sunshine and her father had a heart-to-heart talk of more or less violence, which resulted in a declaration of war. Sunshine asserted, with greater spirit than tact, that she intended to master the intricacies of the elegant new dances taught at the Maizquint. Belshazzer immediately planned the extermination of that worthy and innocuous institution.

Contemporary conditions were against the Maizquint. Belshazzer had recently been elected Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise and in his flush of power he manipulated the collective wills of the majority members pretty much as he pleased. And this particular time he pleased to will them against dancing. With the able assistance of the green-eyed Cass Driggers, might-have-been-betrothed of Sunshine Elliott, he did a bit of electioneering, and at the weekly meeting the previous night had successfully slipped through two readings of a resolution placing the lodge on record as opposing dancing. And as every potential patron of the high-priced Maizquint was a member of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, the condition of things when the third and last reading should have been successfully held the following Monday was not very pleasing in prospect to Quintus and his pretty little wife.

At three o'clock the following afternoon Quintus Weefalls alighted from a car before the massive

Terminal Station, stepped carefully across the street so that he might not blemish with dirt the immaculate grey-suède uppers of his black patent-leather shoes and minced into the coloured waiting room. He made his way to the window and purchased a ticket for Attalla, at which town one destined for Gadsden alights from the train. As he turned away he heard a voice — a soft, dulcet voice; a voice quiver with gladness at the meeting:

“Mistuh Weefalls!”

He whirled and bowed with a single motion.

“Ise dawg’d if’n ’tain’t Miss Elliott!”

The young girl dimpled bewitchingly.

“Is you goin’ to Attalla too?”

“Too?” he echoed. “You ain’t mean to tell me you is goin’ they?”

“I suttinly is!”

“On this heah fo’ ’clock train?”

“The ve’y same one.”

Into the mind of Quintus Weefalls, there leaped his wife’s mandate. He was to charm the radiant Sunshine in hopes, that she might dissuade her father from pursuance of his course of vengeance against the Maizquint. The wealth of a contagiously sunny nature was injected into the smile he bestowed upon her.

“If’n this ain’t the ve’y fines’ luck!”

She made it unanimous.

“Ain’t you talkin’ now?”

"Ain't I jus'? I always hates to travel alone."

"Also me."

"I is been thinkin'——"

A strange voice broke in upon them, a voice in which there was an ill-concealed nuance of ribaldry:

"Reckon I is done caught you now!"

They turned to face a small man; younger and even more dapper than Quintus Weefalls; a junior fashion plate, flawless from the crown of his blue felt hat to the pointed and scintillating toes of his screamingly yellow shoes. They chorused the newcomer's name:

"Florian Slappey!"

The newcomer bowed with exaggerated politeness. He stroked his chin with his left hand that they might miss none of the brummagem brilliance of his newest ring.

"Right the fust time off! Reckon you didn't hahdly espec' nobody to see you-all, eh?"

Quintus shook his head in puzzlement.

"How come not?"

Florian winked portentously.

"Huh! Reckon I ain't deaf."

"'Bout which?"

"I is been heahin' things."

"Which things?"

"Oh! I guess when a man an' a gal which is been settin' up to each other fo' a long time stahts off on a trip t'gether ——"

Then they understood at what he was driving. Sunshine gave him a playful shove.

"G'wan, Flo'ian, you is the kiddin'est man! You talks like we was 'lopin'."

"You said it, Sunshine!"

Quintus threw back his head and roared with laughter. He winked knowingly.

"You is sho' some deteckative, Florian."

"I reckon I is got sense 'nough to put one an' one t'gether an' make a couple." He turned to the girl: "S'posin' I tell Cass Driggers you is elopin' with a han'some man from Jersey City?"

She shrugged.

"You c'n tell Cass Driggers anything which you like. I ain't botherin' my haid bouten him sence he is fightin' the Maizquint."

"No-o! I ain't hahdly reckon you is. Not now, noways."

Florian inspected the pair closely. He had been joking, but now the idea came to him seriously that perhaps they were eloping. Certainly they had been more than friendly in the immediate past and there was every reason why they should resort to an elopement, the principal motive being the rabid parental opposition in the Elliott household. Florian mumbled to himself. The more he thought of it the more convinced he became that there might be truth hidden in his jocular conjecture.

"Is you-all elopin'?"

"Don't be silly, Florian!"

“ You ain’t said you ain’t.”

“ An’ we ain’t said we is.”

“ How ’bout it, Quintus? ”

Quintus was quite sure that Florian was not serious. The idea appealed to him as so utterly preposterous that he didn’t fancy any one else could consider it soberly. And Quintus fancied himself considerable kidder. Good enough; if Florian wanted to kid with him he’d give as good as he got.

“ Reckon this heah is a free country, Flo’ian. They ain’t no law which says a man cain’t think anything he wants.”

“ Even if’n it’s about gittin’ ma’ied right soon? ”

“ Even such.”

Sunshine gazed from one to the other of the men. She had a strong hunch that all was not as it should be, yet the repartee seemed harmless enough. She felt her youth and unsophistication pitifully and she didn’t want to make herself ridiculous by taking either of the men too seriously. Therefore she blundered into the very worst move she could have made. She put a restraining hand on Florian’s arm.

“ Don’t you go tellin’ my pa no such foolishment as that me an’ Mistuh Weefalls is elopin’ together with each other.”

Florian stuck tongue in cheek and shook his head waggishly.

“ Reckon I knows when to keep my mouth shut.”

The announcer bellowed a mouthful of unintel-

ligible words through the waiting room. Quintus suspected that Attalla was mentioned and grabbed his suitcase in one hand and Sunshine's in the other. "Tha's our train! Le's us go!"

Adieus were uttered hastily and they passed through the ticket gate toward the waiting Chattanooga train. Florian stood at the door of the waiting room staring through the smoky train shed. His eyes were narrowed with the travail of excessive thought. He plucked nervously at the place where he had once attempted to grow a moustache. And quite unconsciously he spoke his convictions aloud:

"Ise bettin' they is elopin'!"

He had not meant to voice his thoughts, therefore he jumped when a nasal feminine voice cut eagerly through the atmosphere and dinned into his ears:

"Who is elopin'?"

"Quintus an' Sun ——" The words slipped out of their own volition. He clamped his lips together too late. He flashed an overt hostile glance at his interrogator and his lips curled into a sneer. "Huh! I might've knowed it was you!"

"Quintus Weefalls an' who else?" persisted Callie Flukers, from gaudy hat to rundown heels. His expression was not complimentary to Callie, but that worthy and skinny gossip had no thought at the moment for opinion of her person. She was after information and lots of it.

"And who else?" she echoed herself.

Florian turned insultingly away. He detested this high-voiced carrier and amplifier of tales.

"Nobody else!" he snapped.

"Then how could he be elopin'? Men don' elope by theyse'ves. Leastaways, not these days."

"Quintus Weefalls' business is hisn, Sis Callie, an' I is got a heap better things to do than wo'y my head bouten it."

"Hah!" cackled Sis Callie triumphantly. "Lis'en at him, will you — an' him jus'-a-wonderin' to hisse'f a minute ago was Sunshine Elliott really elopin'."

"Who said sumthin' 'bout Sunshine Elliott?"

"You did!"

"Di'n't!"

"Did! You said 'Sun ——' and' then coughed yo'se'f short. An' besides, I is been watchin' Quintus Weefalls an' that gadabout gal of Belshazzer Elliott's fo' fifteen minutes in the depo' yonder."

"Then," raved Florian Slappey, "I reckon you knows as much about them as what I does."

Sis Callie Flukers patted in satisfied fashion the parallel lines which did duty in her anatomical make-up as hips.

"Reckon I does. An' I knows they is elopin'."

"Then what you ast me fo'?"

"You ain't said they ain't elopin'."

"An' I ain't said they is, is I? I reckon folks is got a right to git ma'ied if'n they wants to, ain't they?"

"Some folks. But Sunshine Elliott is as good as engage' to Cass Driggers an' it ain't decint ——"

"If'n she's swappin' Cass fo' Quintus Weefalls, then all I is got to say is that Sunshine Elliott is got a heap mo' brains in her haid than what I give her credick fo'."

"They ain't nothin' wrong with Cass."

"N'r neither they ain't nothin' right with him. In my 'pinion Cass Driggers is a swell zample of a li'l' less'n nothin' a-tall."

"At least," scorched Callie Flukers in her most intensely personal manner, "he works fo' a livin'."

"Yeh," countered Florian acridly, "an' he ain't the only pusson I knows which is tried to git ma'ied an' coul'n't."

Callie glared. Then she swung round and sped out of the waiting room and out of earshot. Florian stared after her long and furiously. He hated this talemonger with an intensity commendable if only for its consistency. He lighted a Turkish cigarette and inhaled slowly.

"Ise gamblin'," he proclaimed to himself, "that Sis Callie Flukers is thinkin' thoughts!"

He was right — plus. Sis Callie was not only thinking thoughts — she was saying words. Just at that particular moment she was saying them to Christeen Gethers, a lady who ran Callie a very close second in the Gossip Stakes.

Christeen listened in pop-eyed glee.

"An' while they ain't zac'ly admitted to me that

they was runnin' off to git ma'ied," finished Sis Callie, "they done tol' Florian Slappey that, an' he passed it on to me."

Christeen was filled with unholy delight at the news. In the first place Christeen's husband, one Isaac Gethers, had recently been defeated for the Grand Magnificent High Potentacy of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise by Belshazzer Elliott, and while Christeen herself had on one hectic occasion tried to defeat her husband for that exalted post, she was extremely resentful of the outsider who had stolen the proudest decoration from the Gethers 'scutcheon. And in the second place Christeen disliked Sunshine on general principles. Disliking people was Christeen's specialty and she worked at it overtime. Sunshine was young and pretty and popular and she boasted poise, polish and culture — and a figure.

On the tongues of two such persons as Christeen Gethers and Sis Callie Flukers conjecture ceased to be and fact was born. While Christeen was giving Miss Mayola Kye lurid details of the departure from Birmingham of the eloping couple, Sis Callie was telling Mrs. Cleophus White in strictest secrecy.

According to the second edition of the Flukers story, Quintus had confided in her regarding the then impending matrimony and pledged her to secrecy.

"An' Ise on'y tellin' you, Mis' White, cause'n

I an' you is sech good frien's an' I knows you ain't gwine tell nobody else."

Immediately Mrs. Cleophus White streaked it for the home of Mrs. Simeon Broughton with full details. And at the same time that Mayola Kye—retailed it to Mrs. Acey Upshaw, Christeen was on her second lap, with Poppy Blevins for an audience, and Callie was going strong with Narcissy—Moultrie.

Within forty minutes nearly every man and woman in Darktown was possessed of more vital statistics regarding the stormy courtship and elopement of Quintus Weefalls and Sunshine Elliott than would have been possible had the elopement been a fact. And eventually it came to the horrified ears of Belshazzer Elliott, related by marriage to Sunshine in the capacity of father.

By the time it reached Belshazzer it was so perfect as to minutiae of detail that there was no disbelieving it. And it tallied perfectly with Sunshine's sudden and unaccountable passion for a visit to her uncle, Bachus Elliott, in Gadsden. Bachus and Sunshine had never been overly fond of one another and Belshazzer felt now that he should have been suspicious from the first.

Then an awful thought came to Belshazzer. A horrible thought. An almost unthinkable thought. Too often he had witnessed movies wherein a polished city scoundrel elopes with the unsophisticated small-town girl and fails to sanctify their union

in ways made and provided in the marriage laws of the state in question. It was bad enough, reflected Belshazzer, to have Quintus Weefalls for a son-in-law, but it would be a heap worse under the circumstances not to have him for a son-in-law.

Thereupon Belshazzer, after much heckling with a long-distance operator, procured his brother's ear on the telephone. Bachus listened with rabid impatience to the tale of his Birmingham brother.

"Then you means, Belshazzer, that she ain't comin' to visit me a-tall?"

"I ain't meanin' nothin' of the sort, Bachus. What you ain't got in yo' haid is no brains. Co'se she is comin' to see you, but the visit ain't nothin' on'y camelflage. What I wan's you to do is to meet the train an' see that they is really ma'ied. Un'erstan'?"

Bachus grunted. It was very clear.

"They's gwine be ma'ied," he grated into the transmitter. "They is gwine be ma'ied if'n I is got to kill this heah Quintus feller to make him do same."

Meanwhile, beatifically ignorant of the tempests that had been loosed in the cities of their departure and destination, Quintus Weefalls and Sunshine Elliott had been enjoying their journey to the ultimate. Their conversation, innocently personal, had principally to do with Sunshine's fondness for dancing, her detestation of her father's unreasoning

and obnoxious opposition to the fast-expiring Maizquint; and, on Quintus' part, with the foundering of his hopes for a prosperous several seasons as master of the dance in Birmingham.

"If'n they was on'y some way to win yo' father over so he'd withdraw his oppysition to us'n an' kill the las' readin' of that motion in the lodge," wailed Quintus.

"'Tain't no hope of that," gloomed Sunshine. "When pa gits his mind sot on a thing they ain't nothin' less'n th'ee angels an' fo' sticks of dynamite gwine budge him."

Tempus fugited with pleasing swiftness. In an inconceivably short space of time the conductor announced Attalla, and Sunshine and Quintus collected paraphernalia. The train stopped and they alighted. Then they, too, stopped.

Mr. Bachus Elliott hove into view and bore down upon them. Under normal circumstances Mr. Bachus Elliott was a man of unfortunately forbidding mien. He was a veritable giant of a man; deep of chest, broad of shoulder and lowering of brow. He walked with a vicious swing and his tremendous muscular arms dangled menacingly from muscle-knotted shoulders. Quintus gave one look and trembled. He didn't know Bachus Elliott and he had an overpowering hunch that he didn't want to. Also, it was agonizing plain to him that Bachus intended to make his acquaintance suddenly and positively.

Sunshine started forward gamely, albeit she, too, was more than a little apprehensive.

“Uncle Bachus ——”

Bachus glared past her at the cowering Quintus.

“This heah is Quintus Weefalls, ain’t it?” he bellowed.

Quintus’ lips were dry. He tried futilely to moisten them, then bobbed his head in assent. Bachus swung away.

“Come along with me,” he roared, “both of you!”

Sunshine resurrected her voice:

“Where to?”

“You come along with me!”

They came — for a few steps. Then Quintus’ mind got busy. It worked like lubricated lightning. It was patent that this mammoth uncle of Sunshine’s harboured no very deep love for him and that something had been planned in which Quintus was the plannee. He felt a premonition that something was about to transpire which was not entirely beneficial to himself.

There was a crowd at the little Attalla station and Quintus grimly determined that if something was bound to happen he’d better let it happen there. In the presence of disinterested witnesses it was apt to prove less violent. He conscripted a quavery voice and addressed Bachus:

“Mistuh Elliott?”

Bachus stopped, whirled, glowered and grunted:

“Huh?”

"Where you is goin' to?"

"Tha's fo' me to know an' you to fin' out. You come along!"

Quintus ceased to locomote.

"Heah's where I stays at ontill you tell me where we is goin' to."

He was surprised at his own display of nerve. So was Bachus. Bachus said so. Quintus was adamant. Bachus threatened.

"Li'l' cullud man," he rumbled, "I ain't use'n to have no folks go contrariwise to me."

Quintus was in a cold perspiration. He was desperate. He was resolved that Bachus should never get him out of sight of witnesses. He didn't know what it was all about, but he did know that it was not pleasant. "I remains right where I is at ontill you explains, Mistuh Elliott."

"Oh, you does, does you?"

"I does!"

Bachus hesitated. Then: "I is takin' you an' Sunshine to a preacher."

Quintus flashed a wild glance at Sunshine and Sunshine gazed with drooping-jawed surprise at Quintus.

"Preacher?" they chorused. "What for?"

"To git ma'ied," snapped Bachus.

Worse and more of it.

"Who says we wan's to git ma'ied?" queried Quintus inanely.

"I does!"

“ But — but —— ”

“ I reckon,” sneered Bachus, “ that nex’ thing you is gwine tell me you-all ain’t elopin’ ! ”

“ Co’s’e we ain’t ! ”

The frank denial had an immediate and forbidding effect on Bachus. He stepped close and towered fearsomely over the shaking figure of the dancing teacher.

“ Lis’en heah at what I is sayin’, Mistuh Weefalls! This heah is gwine be a brief an’ p’inted dialogue an’ I is gwine do all the talkin’. Belshazzzer jus’ telyphoned me from Bummin’ham that you-all was elopin’ together with each other an’ he says I was to see that you was propilly ma’ied. An’ he di’n’t say nothin’ else. So, b’lieve me, I is gwine do what he asts ! ”

“ But Mistuh Elliott —— ”

“ Don’ you but me no buts! I tol’ you I was the one gwine do the talkin’. You keep yo’ fool mouth shut an’ come along ! ”

The horror-stricken eyes of Quintus and Sunshine clashed. They liked one another; liked one another very much. But they had no desire to commit mutual matrimony. In the first place, Sunshine was genuinely fond of Mr. Cass Driggers, of Birmingham. And in the second place, Quintus Weefalls was thoroughly and completely married to Maizy Battel, once of Montgomery and later of Jersey City.

Quintus was extremely up against it. He

groaned at the thought that this was but another of the multiform entanglements arising from his unmoral scheme to keep the Birmingham populace in ignorance of his married state.

At first he thought of telling Bachus that he was already married. The idea was hastily discarded. With Bachus' mind navigating in channels not particularly complimentary to either his niece or her gentleman friend, it was patent that an eleventh-hour admission of his marriage would cause Bachus to think thoughts resulting in a condition not pleasant for Quintus. Confession of past marriage was obviously out of the question.

It was equally impossible for Quintus to marry Sunshine. He knew that such a thing as bigamy is extremely punishable. Whereupon an idea came to him full panoplied. He reached out strong fingers and covertly pinched Sunshine's plump arm. Her eyes flashed a message of understanding. It said plainly as words: "I is follerin' yo' lead."

Quintus laughed. He tried to make it a hail-fellow-well-met laugh and succeeded only in emitting a quavery giggle.

"Never heard of no folks gittin' ma'ied twice," he vouchsafed.

"Huh? Twice?"

"Tha's what I done remahked."

"What you mean — twice?"

"I means what I said! Me an' Sunshine is done ma'ied a'ready!"

He distinctly heard Sunshine's startled gasp of surprise. Then out of the corner of his eye he saw a faint smile decorate her lips as comprehension of his plan came to her. She knew that by his assertion of their existing marriage he would avoid a ceremony in Attalla which would be binding upon both of them, planning — when they later returned to Birmingham and safety — to make explanations which Bachus would never listen to judicially.

"Ma'ied a'ready?" Bachus was finding it difficult to deal with this new phase of what had been to this moment a very simple affair.

"Co'se we is!" clinched Quintus with growing confidence. "We got ma'ied secret an' private befo' we ever lef' Bummin'ham. We is still ma'ied. So how come you wants us to git ma'ied again?"

"Belshazzar di'n't know you was ma'ied."

"Suttinly not! You don' think we was advertisin' it, does you? Now if'n you insis's on us doin' it again ——"

"Is it true, Sunshine, that you an' Mistuh Weefalls is a'ready ma'ied?"

Miss Sunshine Elliott returned her uncle's stare calmly. Her poise was magnificent.

"Co'se we is!" she replied. "Seems like any one with any sense could tell that!"

Bachus shook his head in bewilderment.

"Ma'ied a'ready," he muttered. "Then of co'se they ain't no use gittin' ma'ied again, is they?"

"Suttinly not!" they agreed in enthusiastic unison.

"I swanny——" He mopped his forehead. "Durn that Belshazzer! He never was no han' to fin' out things in advance." Bachus turned away. Convinced that they were safely married, it was plain that his duty was terminated. "I'll jes' telyphone Belshazzer bouten you-all bein' a'ready ma'ied."

Sunshine started forward pleadingly.

"Nemmin' 'bout that!"

"I promised I'd telyphone him after I seen you-all."

"But ——" Quintus grabbed Sunshine's arm in warning and she reconciled herself to the lesser of the two evils.

Bachus reached his brother on the telephone.

"Quintus Weefalls an' Sunshine is done came," he proclaimed. Quintus watched nervously and saw Bachus smile. "Sho' now, Belchazzer," said the big man at the telephone, "they is ma'ied safe an' soun' as you ever was in yo' life."

A few moments of idle conversation, then Bachus turned and extended the receiver toward Quintus. "Yo' new pa wants to make talk with you."

Quintus inhaled sharply. His new pa! There was menace in the thought. Events were piling up a little too rapidly for his peace of mind. He advanced timidly toward the telephone, knowing that he must needs be very circumspect in speech

within hearing of the now genially smiling Bachus.

“Hello!”

The voice of his temporary father-in-law came back to him over the wire adrip with honeyed sweetness. “Hello, Quintus! That you?”

“Yassuh. This is me!”

“We ain’t been sech good frien’s in the pas’, is we, Quintus?”

“Nossuh, not so’s you could notice it. But ’twa’n’t my fault.”

“I know it wa’n’t, son.” Quintus winced. “But I just want to say that the pas’ is pas’ an’ bygones has went. We is both gwine fo’give an’ fo’get. Ain’t it the truth?”

“Y-y-yassuh! Sho’ is!”

“An’ I wan’s you to know that they ain’t no hahd feelin’s betwix I an’ you over how you run away with Sunshine. She’s a good li’l’ gal, Quintus, an’ I wan’s you should treat her right.”

“Yassuh. Ise sho’ gwine treat her right! Sho’ is!”

“I knowed it. I always said you was a fine young man. I think we is gwine make a very happy fambly, don’ you, son?”

“Oh, yes,” groaned Quintus, “we is gwine be mos’ ve’y happy.”

“An’, Quintus, bouten that Maizquint dancin’ school ——”

Quintus perked up his ears. In mentioning the

Maizquint, Belshazzer was striking close to where Quintus lived. "Yassuh, bouten the Maizquint?"

"I is ben fightin' that dancin' 'cademy, Quintus, 'count'n I is 'posed to dancin'. But, of co'se, now that you is ma'ied to my daughter an' is theyfo' became my son-in-law I ain't so narrow-minded that I cain't see where I was wrong. I is a lib'ral an' a broad-minded man, Quintus, an' when I is wrong I admits it."

"Y-yassuh, yo' sho' does!"

"An' bein' as you is in the fambly now, Quintus, I is decided that I is gwine withdraw that motion which I had up in the lodge which says The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise is ag'in dancin'. In fac', bein' a broad an' lib'ral man, I is gwine intraduce another motion which says that they favours it! An' I is wishin' that the Maizquint will be ve'y sickseful an' make heaps 'of money fo' you an' Sunshine."

Quintus staggered. Of all that had occurred in the very immediate past this was the most viciously ironical. Belshazzer, father-in-law, was a grey bird of another colour from Belshazzer, militant enemy. He groggily relinquished the receiver to Sunshine in order that the supposed bride might receive the congratulations of her forgiving father. And Quintus gave himself over to an intensive few moments of wracking thought.

So far as the general coloured population of Birmingham was concerned, Quintus Weefalls knew

that he was ephemerally married to Sunshine Elliott. Until five minutes before his dilemma had been embarrassing, but that was all. Now its complexion had changed.

Today was Wednesday. On the following Monday night the meeting of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise was to be held. At that meeting, provided that Belshazzer Elliott still considered himself the father-in-law of Quintus, he was not only going to put the quietus on his motion, which would have put the lodge on record against dancing and so ruin the Maizquint, but he was going to fight for the adoption of a resolution which would make the lodge an ally of the pretentious modern dancing academy and insure success and prosperity for Quintus and his real wife.

Provided Belshazzer continued to regard himself as Quintus' father-in-law! There was the big rub. Quintus determined that Belshazzer must at all hazards be kept in the dark as to the true status until after that epochal meeting, for Quintus knew well that, once the lodge had taken a decided stand either way on the dancing-school question, the matter was settled for a long time to come.

That much was certain. Until after the meeting Monday night Belshazzer was fated to be his father-in-law, the only fly in the ointment being that such a condition made Sunshine his wife—and Quintus already had a wife; a wife for whom he cared devotedly. The inventor of the Quintes-

sence Shiver and the Battel-ax Glide was up against a puzzling proposition and he knew it. But necessity for thought mothered a real idea. He waited until Sunshine had finished her conversation with their almost mutual parent and managed adroitly to remove himself from the presence of the mollified and now congratulatory Bachus. They boarded the interurban trolley for Gadsden, alighted in that busy and flourishing little city and strolled past the city hall. It was Sunshine who mentioned the vital topic of the moment.

"You is done done it now, Mistuh Weefalls."

"Done which?"

"Comprised me."

"Huh! I reckon you ain't one-half so comprised as what I is. I reckon I is the mostes' comprised man in this heah world."

"That bein' the case," proffered Sunshine with amazing aplomb, "I reckon the bes' thing us can do is to git ma'ied."

Quintus quivered.

"You too? Ain't they nobody gwine stop tryin' to git me ma'ied to somebody which I don' want to ma'y?"

"Well," flashed the girl, "I don't want to ma'y you, neither!"

"Thank the Lawd fo' that! After this I reckon you don' hahdly want to ma'y nobody, does you?"

And then Quintus got a surprise. Quite suddenly and without warning Miss Sunshine Elliott

lost her poise. Her delicate frame shook with a paroxysm of sobbing and her voice came to his ears a'choke with tears.

"Yes, I does want to ma'y somebody! Indeedy I does! An' now I cain't! I wan's to ma'y Cass Driggers — an' I wan's to ma'y him no-o-o-ow!"

For three consecutive seconds Quintus stared raptly. Then he threw back his head and gave his thigh a resounding slap.

"O-o-oh! Gal!" he chortled. "You sho' said sumthin' that time!"

She looked at him through a mist of tears.

"Meanin' which?"

"You wan's to ma'y Cass Driggers, does you?"

"Y-y-yes! Co'se I does!"

"Now? Right away? T'morrow?"

Her face brightened.

"The sooner the quicker."

"An' if'n I could 'range it fo' you an' Cass to git ma'ied an' live happy ever after t'morrow, yo'd be willin' to he'p me out on a li'l' scheme of mine?"

"Quintus Weefalls, if'n yo'd do that I'd do anythin' you ast which was hones' an' respectful!"

"Cullud gal! You is sho' gwine have yo' chance. Now lis'en close an' 'tentive at what I is sayin'."

Quintus plunged with impassioned fervour into the details of his conversation with Sunshine's father and his ideas of the necessity for continuing the marriage deception until Monday night should have passed.

"T'day is We'nesday, Miss Sunshine," he wound up, "an' if'n you is willin' to he'p me, I is willin' to he'p you. All what you is got to do is to keep yo' pa thinkin' that we is ma'ied ontill after he is done put the lodge on reco'd as favourin' dancin', which is gwine inshuah the sickness of the Maizquint.

"Now I is been figgerin' that it woul'n't be fair to you to go on playin' like you is my wife, which same you ain't, thank heaven — not meanin' no 'fence — ontill nex' Chuesday mawnin' on account the reppitation which you would have lef' woul'n't make clothes fo' a th'ee-legged fly. Now my plan is that I gits Maizy Battel, which is really my wife ——"

"Huh? Maizy Battel yo' wife?"

"Sho' nuff! Who's wife you reckon she is?" And Quintus explained briefly his marital condition and the reasons for its concealment since their advent to Birmingham. "Anyway, as I was sayin', I gits Maizy to come up heah with Cass. When Cass gits heah, safe away from all chance of talkin' too much, we is gwine tell him that I ain't ma'ied to you because I is ma'ied to Maizy, an' meanwhile he is gwine have been so mis'able thinkin' you is a'ready ma'ied to some one else that he's gwine 'gree to anything.

"Now all what I is gwine ast him to do is to marry you heah t'morrow and remain with you in Gadsden ontill Chuesday mawnin'. Then after the

lodge 'fairs is done been 'tended to proper fo' I an' Maizy we will go to yo' pa an' splain it has all been a mistake. Now I asts you, Miss Sunshine, is you willin' or ain't you willin'?"

"But my stayin' heah ——"

"You is gwine be with Cass, ain't you? An' Cass is gwine be yo' husban', ain't he?"

"Ye-eh ——"

"An' you is gwine be havin' a swell an' quiet honeymoon."

The prospect was too roseate for opposition. Sunshine did not understand very clearly just what she was agreeing to, but she did know that her agreement carried with it marriage to Cass — and she said an emphatic yes. Immediately Quintus went into executive session with long distance. The house in which Maizy boarded in Birmingham boasted a telephone, and within ten minutes they were talking.

"Reckon you is been heahin' things bouten me, ain't you, Maizy?"

Her deep-throated chuckle came back to him over the wire: "Reckon I is, Quintus."

"An' you ain't been jealous?"

"Ain't I always said I trus's you, sweetness boy?"

"You is sho' nuff one swell wife, Maizy. But what I called up fo' is to tell you this: They's a sick wind which don' blow no good an' I is got a bran'-new plan. What I wan's you to do is to

git to Attalla t'morrow mawnin' on the local train an' I want you to have Cass Driggers with you. Understand, you is got to bring Cass Driggers! An' you ain't to splain him nothin'."

"S'posin' he won't come?"

"You make him come! You is a persuadin' woman where men is concerned at, Maizy. Ise gwine meet t'morrow's train and be lookin' fo' you an' Cass."

Her voice was a bit doubtful.

"I'll be there, hon, but ——"

"Time's up!" The sharp voice of long-distance central cut in. Quintus and Maizy exchanged hasty adieus. And in her cozy little room in the Twenty-third Street lodging house Mrs. Maizy Battel Weefalls settled herself to some thinking. Finally she rose, doffed her gaudy kimono and rescued from a battered old wardrobe her very best gown. Her lips were set determinedly. She adored Quintus and intended responding to his trust in her.

"Mistuh Cass Driggers," she reflected grimly, "you is gwine be in Attalla t'morrow mawnin' if'n you is got to be drug."

She found Cass Driggers mooning in calf-like misery before the portals of the Frolic Theatre on Eighteenth Street. He was a study in applied misery; one lily on his breast and he'd have passed for a first-class corpse. He fairly oozed unhappi-

ness. It stood out all over him like goose flesh. His eyes flickered with the one spark of interest remaining in things mundane when Maizy addressed him in her most fetching manner. He consented to walk to Capitol Park. They seated themselves on a bench. A remark, which was at once a comment and a criticism, burst from the lips of Mrs. Weefalls.

"My goodness! Mistuh Driggers, you sho' ain't no happy-lookin' man!"

"Huh! You said it!"

"I wan's you to do me a favour, Mistuh Driggers."

"I ain't in the favourin' business, Miss Battel. I ain't want nothin' to do with nobody 'ceptin' on'y if'n they is ridin' me in the fust ca'iage at a fun'ral."

"This is diffe'ent, Mistuh Driggers. I wan's to have you accompany with me somewheres."

The suggestion was sufficiently startling for Cass to roll one languid eye in her direction.

"Where?"

"Gadsden!"

Cass rose. He rose abruptly and angrily. A gaunt and forlorn dignity perched upon his shoulders.

"If'n you thinks you can go pokin' fun at me, Miss Battel ——"

"I ain't pokin' no fun."

"Then you keep Gadsden outen this heah con-vumsation. I ain't got no min' to make talk bouten Gadsden."

"An' you won't go with me?"

"Miss Battel, I is tellin' you hones' an' se'ious that if'n jedgment day was come an' the wo'ld was bu'nin' up they wa'n't on'y one town which was covered with asbestus an' that town was Gadsden — if'n that was the case, Miss Battel, I'd burn!"

Maizy was momentarily nonplussed. She had anticipated difficulty but no such adamantine opposition as this. Quintus was trusting her to produce Cass the following morning. Maizy was a fairly expeditious thinker in an emergency and this was nothing if not that. She evolved a scheme before she knew it. It was an idea staggeringly inspirational. She conscripted a lugubrious expression and plastered it all over her face.

"You ain't the on'y pusson which is been done dirt by recent events which has jus' happened in the immedjit pas', Mistuh Driggers."

"I reckon I is been done the dirtiest."

"You ain't, neither."

"Is!"

"Ain't!"

"Well, if'n I ain't, who has?"

"Me!"

"You?"

"Yeh, me! I reckon you think it ain't nothin' fo' a man to go off an' desert a gal which he is

engage' to an' marry another woman without even tellin' the fust gal that he was thinkin' 'bout it. I reckon yo'd think that wa'n't nothin' a-tall."

"Who done any sech low-down trick as that?"

"Quintus Weefalls!"

"An'— an'— you is the gal? You an' Quintus is engage'?"

"Was!"

"Sufferin' canned tripe! Now ain't that jes' one mo' li'l' slice of purple hell?"

Maizy drove home her advantage. She painted luridly the crass duplicity of Mr. Quintus Weefalls. She not only did the job expertly but she discovered that she had the most avid listener in the world for the task in hand. She called her darling Quintus every thinkable evil name, and Cass fervently made each unanimous.

"So we is in the same identical boat," finished Maizy. "You an' me both. We is los' our chances fo' gittin' ma'ied, an' our future wife an' husband is each other's that same."

"Ain't you tootin' now? Jumpin' jellyfish! I wisht I could git even with that Quintus Weefalls!"

"Also me. I wisht I could. An' with Sunshine Elliott too."

Cass stiffened loyally.

"We ain't 'scussin' Sunshine."

"No-o," she drawled, "we ain't 'scussin' Missis Weefalls!"

"Missis Weef——" He clenched his fist and

slammed it against the bench. "Ow! Ain't it sumthin' fierce? Ain't it now? I wisht I could git even! I wisht we could both git even! I wisht — I wisht — dawg-gawn! I wisht we could git even by marryin' each other!"

He paused, aghast. The words had come first but the idea was engendered yet more swiftly. Maizy was staring wide eyed as though this was not the goal toward which she had been working for ten minutes.

Cass was entranced with his idea. Sunshine was lost to him. Quintus had become his eternal enemy. He fancied Quintus was more than a little fond of Maizy despite his marital passion for Sunshine. And after all Maizy was'n't at all a bad sort. She was easily the best-dressed coloured woman in Birmingham and she had some money.

"They ain't no reason," muttered Cass reflectively, "'gainst us gittin' married!"

"No-o, reckon they ain't, Mistuh Driggers. On'y Ise thinkin' that jus' gittin' married ain't enough. We wan's Quintus an' Sunshine to know we don' care bouten them a-tall."

"You 'loocidated it then, Miss Battel."

"An' if'n we ——" She paused and went through the business of thinking. Finally: "I is got a idea, Mistuh Driggers; a real swell idea which says they is gwine see with they own eyes that our lives aint wrecked none whatever."

"What yo' idea is, Miss Battel?"

“We is gwine up to Gadsden on the early mawnin’ A. G. S. train an’ when we gits there we is gwine git a marriage license an’ then we is gwine fin’ Quintus an’ his wife — Sunshine — an’ make them to be the witnesses at our weddin’. Tha’s what we is gwine do, ain’t we, Mistuh Driggers?”

“Ain’t we? Er — a — is we?”

“We is! It’s a glo’ius idea, an’ then they is gwine know we don’ care if’n they runs off an’ ma’ies one ’nother ev’y day in the whole week. Ain’t it the truth?”

It was the truth. Mr. Driggers admitted that it was. He was speechless with amazement at the artistic conception of vengeance. He was backed into his corner, walloped hard and dropped for the count by a torrent of persuasive oratory which foamed from the impassioned lips of the inspired Maizy. By the time she had finished he was completely convinced that there had never been a scheme of revenge evolved in the known world that was quite so perfect. In fifteen minutes he was sure that no other plan of procedure would leave life worth living. And so they strolled downtown again and said good-bye to each other in front of the Penny Prudential Bank Building.

“But remember,” cautioned Maizy, “you is done promised sacred that you ain’t gwine say a word to nobody bouten I an’ you elopin’ to Gadsden together.”

"I 'members," pledged Cass earnestly. "I ain't gwine drap nary word."

He fled to his boarding house with some slight interest in life restored by the prospect of the immediate future. After all, matrimony with Maizy as the party of the second part wasn't entirely a drab outlook. He jammed a suitcase with his very best clothes and extracted a sizable roll of money from his trunk. Then, because time had to be whiled away, he drifted into Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlour.

The place was crowded. It was crowded with men who knew Cass intimately. A score crowded commiseratingly about him.

"Ise sayin' tha's a devil of a trick fo' a feller's gal to do, Cass — run off an' make ma'iage with another man!"

Cass ducked and tried to get away. Bud Peaglar extended earnest congratulences.

"Bet I woul'n't stan' fo' it if'n I was you, Cass."

"Bet I woul'n't neither," chimed another.

"Ise bettin' she's been lovin' this heah Quintus feller fo' the longes' time," consoled another good friend, "an' ain't on'y been usin' Cass fo' a come-on."

"He sho' is been treated real shabby!"

Cass fled. There was considerably more of haste than of dignity in his exit. He stood on the curb quivering with rage. He'd show 'em — he'd show Sunshine and this poolroom gang of Job's com-

forters that he was as good as the next man and a little bit better than the one after. Believe him, there wasn't nary one of that bunch could elope with no swell gal like Maizy Battel.

He rambled into March Clisby's Gold Crown Ice Cream Parlour. March circled the counter to wait personally upon his new shining star of misery.

"It's what I calls tough luck, ol' man," said March friendly, "yo' gal runnin' off this-a-way."

It was the same when Cass dropped into the lodge rooms of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise, seeking sanctuary from his friends. Wherever he went he ran into sobby sympathy. It cloyed and annoyed beyond belief. He prayed that the coloured population of Birmingham be stricken dumb. He finally made his way to the Champion Moving Picture Theatre — Coloured Only, intending to slip in unobserved and sit alone through the agonies of the feature picture then on display. But in the lobby he ran into a laughing, giggling, care-free crowd. There was Florian Slappey and Mr. and Mrs. Simeon Broughton and Dr. Brutus Herring and Lawyer Evans Chew and Fashion Wilson and Ella Dungee and Mr. and Mrs. Pliny Driver. Each was a trifle more saccharinely sympathetic than the last. They couldn't have expressed keener sorrow had he been recently exterminated.

Human nerves could not stand it. And Cass was no more than human. Like a cornered rat he defended himself, salvaging some semblance

of dignity from the ruin of his castles in Spain.

"Huh! Reckon I don' care!"

"Co'se yo'd say so, Cass, but ——"

"I means it!"

"You an' Sunshine was sweethea'ts."

"Her? Sunshine? Sunshine Elliott, you mean? Why, I ain't been lovin' that gal fo' the longes' time! An' "—under the cross-fire of incredulous grins—"I can prove it!"

"We's from Mizzouri!"

"I can prove it!" he insisted doggedly.

"Le's heah you!"

Cass glanced portentously up and down the crowded street.

"C'n you-all keep a secret?"

"Suttinly we can."

"Well, lis'en heah at me if'n you thinks I is lovin' Sunshine Elliott. Lis'en at this: I is been engage' to marry Maizy Battel sence befo' Sunshine ever looked twice at Quintus Weefalls!"

He paused triumphantly and complacently surveyed the impression he had made. It was impression aplenty. His tidings proved a knockout. And Cass proceeded gloriously to spill the few beans that were left in the dish.

"Maizy and I is elopin' t'morrow mawnin' to git married!"

There was no gainsaying such proof as that. It was iron-bound. His hearers were convinced in spite of themselves and they scattered excitedly

to spread the secret. So it was that when heavy-eyed Cass Driggers and laughing-eyed Maizy Battel Weefalls pulled out of the Terminal Station on the first lap of their journey to Gadsden the following morning the coloured population was still a-seethe with this latest and choicest morsel of gossip.

No one on the train suspected that Cass and Maizy were eloping. Cass uncomfortably felt that it was incumbent upon him to make some show of ardour, but there was something so distantly aloof about Maizy that he didn't dare. She was icily impersonal. Beyond nerving himself to the point of addressing her by her first name, he acted like the merest stranger. It was Maizy's superb poise that held him spell-bound. She was as safe under its cloak as though it was something tangible — chain mail, for instance.

The day was yet young when the train choked to a halt before the station at Attalla. Maizy alighted first, not even trying to conceal the grin of elation that persisted in making her attractive face even more attractive. Behind her laboured Cass Driggers, tugging manfully at his huge veteran suitcase and her neat almost-alligator-skin grip. And on the platform they almost collided with the expectant Quintus Weefalls and Sunshine Elliott.

Cass froze up. His face turned a pale green and his eyes became shot through with yellow. It was Quintus who addressed him.

“ I is sho’ glad you come up with Maizy, Mistuh Driggers.”

Cass turned away in regal hauteur.

“ I ain’t a-tall interest’ in what you is glad of, Mistuh Weefalls.”

“ Of co’s’e when we esplains ——”

“ They ain’t no ’splanations necessary.”

“ But, Mistuh Driggers ——”

Cass turned gloweringly upon his *bête noire*.

“ If’n you ’splains any ’splanations to me, Mistuh Weefalls; or if’n you so much as opens yo’ mouth to me one mo’ word I is gwine bust you one!”

Quintus looked at Maizy and Maizy looked at Quintus. Sunshine was gazing starry-eyed love direct at the indifferent Cass. Quintus nodded toward that young man.

“ Wha’s eatin’ him?” he inquired politely.

Whereupon Maizy pulled a tactical boner.

“ I coul’n’t git him up heah no other way,” said she, “ an’ so I had to elope with him!”

A wild whooshy wail surged from Sunshine’s lips.

“ Elope? Cass was elopin’ to make ma’iage with you?”

Mr. Driggers turned the sad and sorrowful eyes of unrequited love upon her.

“ Why not? What does you care? Ain’t you done gone an’ been married a’ready?”

“ No-o! I ain’t!” And Sunshine wept a copi-

ous flood. The tears were plentiful and sad and salty.

Cass stared in bewilderment toward the others of the group. He felt himself distinctly out of the know. Everybody else appeared to understand, but he didn't. His travail of the previous day returned with Antæan strength. And then Maizy took a hand. With remarkable tact and deft phrase she explained the situation to Cass Driggers.

Her strategy was unimpeachable. She first plunged Cass into the nadir of despair, then raised him to the zenith of beatitude. By the time her task was completed he had attained a state of supreme exaltation. True, he didn't yet grasp the thing in its entirety, but he did understand that Sunshine was not married to Quintus and that she was waiting to marry him that very day and that all the payment he was required to make for this stupendously luscious bliss was to keep his mouth shut regarding the nuptials until after the next Monday meeting of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise.

He promised. Just at that moment he would have promised anything short of murder. It was agreed that the to-be Mr. and Mrs. Cass Driggers were to remain in either Attalla or Gadsden until the following Tuesday morning. That was all. With the advent of the day following Monday night they were free to do as they pleased.

Quintus volunteered to break the news to father. In truth, he rather relished the task. It would be no mean triumph — this telling the Grand Magnificent High Potentate of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise just how he had been outgeneraled. Quintus was very much pleased with himself. He almost believed that he had planned every minute detail. He allowed his brain to run riot and voiced his plan of telling coloured Birmingham that he and Maizy had become wedded to one another in Gadsden, thus putting an end once and for all to the deception that had begotten the trouble.

And so Cass and Sunshine were married. They found a neat little boarding house on the outskirts of Gadsden and promised to remain in seclusion until Tuesday morning. They promised eagerly. Remaining in seclusion for several days was not without its advantages.

Quintus and Maizy wished the newlyweds well and boarded a southbound fast train. But instead of getting off at Birmingham they continued through to Bessemer. They spent the night in that city and the following morning took a trolley, transferred at Fairview and eventually established themselves in a quiet boarding house near the Moro Park section of Ensley. They had one idea in the world — to make themselves a little more inconspicuous than nothing at all until the following Tuesday.

They were partially successful. That is, they

were completely successful for part of the time. The cosmos cracked Sunday afternoon while they were rambling arm-in-arm down the wide shady street leading to Fairfield. From the ecstatic void of absolute content a voice whipped. It dinned in their ears above the racket of a recalcitrant motor. A dilapidated flivver careened crazily up to the curb and jerked to a halt. Quintus whirled, such hair as he had trying its best to stand on end.

He gazed straight into the eyes of Belshazzer Elliott, his supposed father-in-law!

"Quintus!"

"M-m-mistuh Elliott!"

"What you is doin' heah in Ensley?"

"J-j-jes' w-w-walkin' 'round'."

"Where's Sunshine?"

"Sunshine? Sunshine?"

"Yeh, my gal Sunshine!"

"Oh; her! I reckon she's up to Gadsden."

"You reckon?" howled the paternal parent of the bride. "Does you mean to stan' there an' tell me you ain't know fo' shuah?"

"W-w-why, yes! I r-r-reckon I does!"

Belshazzer saw Maizy. He passed a shaky hand across his corrugated forehead.

"An' what is you doin' heah, Missis Driggers?"

Maizy didn't answer. She failed to recognize her name at first. And when she did she hedged desperately.

"I jus' came down."

Something was wrong and Belshazzer knew it. He flung open the tonneau door in a manner that brooked no opposition.

"Git in!" he commanded tersely. "I wan's to make some talk with you-all."

They were absolutely devoid of desire to make talk with him. They stalled valiantly, but Belshazzer was immovable. They entered the car. He swung it round, headed back through Ensley Highlands, hit the newly paved interurban road that connects Fairview and Birmingham and consigned speed ordinances to the lower regions. Twenty minutes later he quivered to a halt before his pretentious home on Avenue F. Then his eyes, too, popped open and his jaw dropped. As for Quintus, he cast one shocked glance at the tableau on the veranda and slumped in his seat like a half-filled sack of meal.

"Ol' Maizquint Dancin' Palace," he soliloquized, "you is done daid an' buried!"

The scene on the porch was pregnant with unpleasant possibilities. It couldn't well have been worse for Quintus and Maizy.

The central figure in the picture was an over-large, superpowerful negro man who thirty-seven years before had been christened Bachus Elliott. To his right squatted a dumb and excruciatingly miserable Cass Driggers. On his left was Sunshine. They were saying nothing and saying it

frequently. Belshazzer shook his head. Events were too rapid and too surprising for his comprehension.

He fairly dragged Quintus and Maizy to the porch. There Bachus rose and his voice boomed triumphantly across the lawn.

“This heah is a swell daughter what you is got, Belshazzer.”

Belshazzer bristled like a fighting cock.

“What you mean by yo’ base ’sinuations, Bachus?”

“I means what I says. Any gal which marries one man an’ spen’s her honeymoon with another ain’t no lady!”

“Who spent whos’ honeymoon with which?”

“Sunshine! I heard tell bouten it up home, but I di’n’t b’lieve it at fust until I onwestigated. After I done same I saw that Sunshine was spendin’ her weddin’ trip with this heah li’l’ Cass Driggers shrimp. Co’s’e they said they was married to each other, but I knowed better an’ as soon as they said what they said I puck ’em up an’ brought ’em to Bummin’ham.”

Belshazzer turned upon Quintus:

“An’ you is been spendin’ yo’ honeymoon with Cass’ wife, ain’t you?”

“No!” The monosyllable rang out in chorus from the four principals.

“But — but you an’ her an’ she an’ him ——”

Quintus threw his arms wide in a gesture of surrender. He turned a haggard, appealing face to his wife.

"You tell 'em, Maizy. You is a wonder on 'splainin' schemes of mine which is done flivvered."

For the third time within five days Maizy rose to the explaining occasion. She started a little bit before the beginning and went straight through to the end, omitting no detail and not failing to amplify those that were best calculated to rouse sympathy for herself and Quintus.

As for Quintus, that gentleman had fallen into a comatose state. On the very eve of supreme success, when things looked brightest, direst disaster had come. Twenty-eight additional hours and the meeting of The Sons and Daughters of I Will Arise would have been over and Belshazzar Elliott, believing Quintus his son-in-law, would have defeated the original resolution against dancing and substituted for it one that would have insured the perpetual success of the Maizquint.

But now all bets were off. Quintus watched the expression of Belshazzar's face with a curious, morbid interest. For a while, as Belshazzar came to understand that his daughter was married to the man of his and her own choice and not to the dapper dancing master, Belshazzar smiled. But Quintus was not fooled regarding that smile. He knew that it was the sardonic smile of victory in a contest in which Quintus was the vanquished.

The fateful lodge meeting was scheduled for the following night. Quintus envisioned the embittered and unshackled Belshazzer as mounting the platform and orating magnificently upon the damning evils of dancing and the necessity for the extermination of the Maizquint. He and Maizy were doomed professionally; there wasn't a vestige of doubt about that. He settled down in his chair in limp and lachrymose agony of soul.

And finally Maizy's story was finished. Belshazzer reflected meticulously. Then he kissed his daughter.

"You sho' done wrong to fool yo' pa, chile, but I fo'gives you. An' b'lieve me when I says you is better off married to Cass."

He faced Quintus.

"Ain't you shame' on yo'se'f?"

Quintus flung his head high. He was beaten but he was no quitter.

"No!"

"Runnin' off with my gal ——"

"I never run off with her. It was all a mistake. I was married to Maizy all the time."

"But ——"

"Now lis'en heah, Mistuh Elliott! I ain't mindin' to argify with you. 'Tain't no use. I know when I is beat. But I is remahkin' that you is done I an' Maizy dirt. I ain't sorry fo' nothin' I is done or fo' nothin' which you thinks I is done. One mo' day an' we would of had you beat. But

we is los' an' I ain't gwine give you the fun of seein' me welch. You go right on ahaid an' hol' yo' ol' lodge meetin' an' put 'em on the books ag'in dancin'. You cain't make me mad no mo'. It's gwine ruint us — I is admittin' that — but folks is stood a heap wuss things 'thout dyin'. Go right ahead an' run the Maizquint out of business!"

Belshazzer put out a gentle, restraining hand. His expression was sanctimoniously forgiving. "Wait a li'l' minute, Mistuh Weefalls. You is pregressin' too speedy."

"Huh?"

"A truly great man," said Belshazzer unctuously, "is one which sees the errer of his ways sometimes, an' when I think you was my son-in-law I done a heap of thinkin'. An' that thinkin', Mistuh Weefalls, made me believe mebbe I is been hasty in my jdgments. Mebbe they ain't no hahm in a high-class an' silect dancin' 'cademy like what you an' Mis' Weefalls runs. An' so I is been thinkin'——"

Quintus rose groggily and placed a beseeching hand on Belshazzer's shoulder.

"Don' you kid with me, Mistuh Elliott! Fo' the Lawd's sake, don' you go kiddin' with me!"

"I is se'ious, Mistah Weefalls."

"Does you mean to say, Mistuh Elliott, that even though I ain't went an' ma'ied yo' daughter you is gwine defeat yo' own motion tomorrow night?"

You mean you is gwine put the lodge down in favour of dancin' so's the Maizquint will make a sickness?"

Belshazzer nodded solemnly.

"Yes, Mistuh Weefalls, I means jes' that. I is a righteous man, Mistuh Weefalls, which don' want to do no injustices to nobody, an' I is wishin' the Maizquint a long an' prosperous life. As I say, I is a hones' man."

"Nossuh," negatived Quintus, his voice freighted with bliss, "you ain't no hones' man, Mistuh Elliott. You is a angel!"

After darkness rosiest dawn had come. Cass and Sunshine were happy and forgiven. Quintus and Maizy faced certain success and undreamed-of prosperity. And even Belshazzer Elliott was happy.

Belshazzer, in fact, was unusually happy. He fairly reeked with self-content. He was conscious of a sensation of unctuousness, of nobility of character. He had proved himself of a large and forgiving nature.

Then, too, there were other reasons — more practical ones. He extracted from an inside pocket a long, neatly folded document for which he had paid a sizable sum. He had procured the document two days previously when still under the delusion that Quintus Weefalls, part proprietor of the Maizquint Dancing Palace, was his son-in-law.

The document was a conveyance in fee simple of the dance hall from Semore Mashby to Belshazzer Elliott!

“And,” muttered Belshazzer sanctimoniously, “if’n I hadn’t of been lib’ral minded an’ changed my views bouten dancin’ this heah asset woul’n’t of been nothin’ on’y a liability!”

COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!

THE questing gaze of Mr. George Shivers wandered idly toward the rear of the gaunt, unpainted, one-story structure which was so like its fellows of the immediate vicinity that the whole had recently been advertised for sale as "one section negro rental property, with sixteen houses."

The gaze of Mr. George Shivers wandered languidly toward the rear of this particular house, and then it ceased wandering. So did Mr. Shivers. His eyes opened a trifle wider and an expanse of shiny white teeth became visible in the ample frame of yellow-brown face. Then Mr. Shivers shook his head in a manner that betokened moieties of disgust and puzzlement, approached the fence that separated barren yard from cracked sidewalk and continued to stare. He abstractedly filliped a bit of dust from his immaculate chauffeur's uniform.

The spectacle upon which he gazed intrigued his interest and aroused his curiosity. For perhaps five minutes he gave rapt attention and then his thirst for first-hand knowledge conquered. He passed through the front gate, which gaped invitingly open, circled the house and paused by the kitchen steps.

The object of his attention paid little heed to the fact that Mr. Shivers became embarrassingly aware of the fact that Mr. Luscious Chester did not even know he was there. Mr. Shivers coughed politely, but Mr. Chester did not so much as raise his head.

Luscious Chester was absorbedly busy. He held in his hands a large red rooster, a very young and a very game rooster. The ebony face of Luscious bent intently over the bird and soft, honeyed words dripped from between the lips of Luscious as he lowered the bird toward the ground, allowed the lanky muscular legs to flail fiercely at the turf, then raised him again. Mr. Shivers understood little of the jargon which Luscious intoned so earnestly:

“Tha’s it, Gaffer; shuffle yo’ laigs! Shuffle ’em hahd, ol’ cock! Git a li’l snap into them kicks, birdie boy! ’Tain’t no time fo’ studyin’ when you is in the pit! Now — now there — a li’l bit hahder, Gaffer! Now, you high-bred bird, you shuffle!”

Mr. Shivers coughed again. Luscious continued to be engrossed in the shuffling of the bird, Gaffer. Mr. Shivers instinctively resented the other’s obliviousness of his presence. He spoke:

“Luscious!”

No answer.

“You Luscious!”

Still no answer. Mr. Shivers became peeved and allowed his voice to crescendo:

“Ain’t you heah me speakin’ at you, Luscious?”

Luscious heard. Very reluctantly he permitted an intermission in the shuffling. He turned bored eyes upon his visitor. Recognition of Mr. Shivers did not appear to bring with it any surge of delight. Luscious dropped a languid monosyllable:

“ Huh? ”

“ Ain’t you seen me standin’ heah? ”

“ No. ”

“ Well, I is. ”

“ Is you? ”

“ Yes, I is. I is come to make talk with you. ”

“ Is you? ”

“ Cain’t you say no words ’ceptin’ ‘ Is you ’? ”

“ Shuah. ”

Mr. Shivers shook his head disgustedly.

“ You ain’t got no mo’ sense in yo’ haid than that there chicken. What you is makin’ all that foolishment fo’, anyway? ”

“ Which foolishment? ”

“ All what you is been doin’ there — hoppin’ him up an’ down an’ lettin’ him scratch a hole in yo’ landlady’s back yard? ”

“ I is been handlin’ him. ”

“ Handlin’ him? Co’s’e you is handlin’ him! Any blin’ man ’thout no eyesight could see you is handlin’ him. Question I asts is: What you is handlin’ him so foolish fo’? ”

“ I is trainin’ him, ” explained Luscious with the air of one infinitely bored by the colossal ignorance of another, “ fo’ a fight. ”

"Fight with which?"

"'Nother rooster."

"Whose other rooster?"

"I dunno. Mos' anybody's rooster."

Mr. Shivers' expression became one hundred and ten per cent contemptuous.

"You an' chickens, Luscious! If'n you knowed as much bouten anythin' else as what you does bouten chickens you wouldn't be such a fool as you is."

"Ain't it the truth?" agreed Luscious mildly.

"An' 'tain't gwine git you nowhere," raved Mr. Shivers. "What you ever git outen chicken fightin', I'd like you to tell me?"

"I is made a li'l money outen it, Brother Shivers, an' I is got Gaffer."

"Where you git him at?"

"Cap'n Jackson Ramsay, which runs the Pool an' Ginuwine lott'ry, give him to me."

"Fo' which?"

"I handles an' conditions his birds fo' him, Brother Shivers, as a side line from my pfeession of wukkin' in the coal yahd. Las' week Cap'n Ramsay went an' won a big main up to Nashville which I trained his birds fo', an' he says he is payin' me money an' fo' brawtus I c'n have any one bird what he is got."

"An' you silected that rooster?"

"I done that same—yes. He's a won'erful bird, Brother Shivers."

"How many times is he ever fit?"

"Ain't never fit."

"Then how you know he is any good?"

"I knows his breedin'. He's a sure nuff real swell-bred bird, Gaffer is."

George Shivers gazed malevolently at the bird and then at Luscious Chester.

"You an' Gaffer could swap brains," he sizzled, "an' nobody woul'n't never know the diffe'nce."

"Mebbe not," returned Luscious philosophically. "but fightin' cocks is kept me from goin' hongry an' nekkid many's the time."

"An' tha's all what you cares?"

"Yes," started Luscious. Then he paused awkwardly and flushed an exquisite lavender. "Mos' all, that is."

"Mentionin' which name?" asked Mr. Shivers darkly.

"You know."

"Missis Spinola Reed?"

"Tha's which."

"She ain't lovin' you none!" snapped Shivers.

Luscious showed a trace of spirit.

"She ain't said she ain't."

"An' she ain't said she is, is she?"

"No-o. But I reckon she is got a right to be contrary, ain't she, Brother Shivers? She's a pow'ful rich widow lady."

"Yeh, she is that, sho' nuff. They tells me that her husban', Silver Reed, done lef' her th'ee thou-

san' dollars insurance, an' she got two thousan' mo' from the railroad which done run over him. Five thousan' dollars in cash is a heap of good eatin', Luscious."

Luscious' eyes narrowed hostilely. "I be'lieve you cares mo' for her five thousan' dollars than what you does fo' her," he accused.

Mr. Shivers laughed mockingly.

"An' I reckon you ain't wantin' them five thousan' a-tall, is you?"

"W'en I ma'ies," returned Luscious with ponderous dignity, "I ma'ies a woman an' not sumthin' t' eat!"

George Shivers stared. He smiled crookedly.

"You is a'mos' fool 'nough to mean that," he vouchsafed.

Luscious said nothing. For an interminable period he continued to say the same thing. He looked first at Mrs. Shivers and then at Gaffer. It was plain that he wished to rid himself of the former in order that he might continue the exercises of the latter.

There wasn't a doubt about it — Gaffer was a wonderful bird, a bird bred of a long line of victorious fighting cocks. True, Gaffer had yet to enter the pit, equipped with steel spurs, but in training he had indicated every quality of a winner. He was composed of heavy bone and sinewy muscle — every ounce of his five pounds — and Luscious had revelled in the sight of Gaffer flatten-

ing one of the best birds owned by Jackson Ramsay when both were equipped with soft chamois dummies.

Jackson Ramsay was Luscious' idol. As a side line to his lottery and general gambling business, the portly white man was known as one of the king breeders and handlers of fighting cocks in the state of Alabama, and for several years Luscious Chester had been his boy, tending his pens in illness and in health, in success and adversity, handling his cocks day in and day out; handling them and conditioning them to razor edge for the big mains. And now on the heels of his most brilliant victory the grateful owner had made Luscious a present of the best bird in his collection.

Luscious had chosen wisely and well. He knew almost as much about fighting cocks as did Captain Ramsay. And now he had a bird of his very own; a bird with which he worked daily, hoping against hope that he would some day have the pleasure of personally pitting him against another bird in mortal combat, both backed by substantial wagers.

"I is got to go on handlin' Gaffer," proffered Luscious when Mr. Shivers gave no indication of early departure.

"Durn Gaffer! You is got plen'y time to make fumadiddles with that ol' chicken. I is heah to make talk with you 'bout sumthin' 'pawtant."

"Name which?"

"Missis Spinola Reed."

Again an unmistakable flicker of interest in the eyes of Luscious Chester. The wealthy and widowed Spinola was the one subject in life which could divert his interest from the beloved game-cocks. And Luscious did not relish mention of Spinola by George Shivers. Mr. Shivers was by way of being Luscious' only rival for the heart and hand and fortune of the coy widow.

"'Bout Spinola?" echoed Luscious.

"Tha's which."

"What about her?"

"Sumthin'," proclaimed Mr. Shivers positively, "is got to be did!"

"What you meanin' at?"

"I mean this, Luscious: Mos' recintly I is been givin' over some time to thinkin' an' I is came to the c'nclusion that right now Spinola ain't thinkin' on marryin' any man 'ceptin' you or either me. Ain't that the truth?"

"Yeh."

"But if'n she don' marry one of us mighty soon she's gwine git a headache tryin' to 'cide betwix' us an' run off with some other feller jes' to settle the question. 'Member this, Luscious, they ain't many single men in Bummin'ham which woul'n't marry five thousan' dollars! An'," he added extenuatingly, "Spinola ain't so wuss, herse'f."

Luscious nodded solemnly. "You is got a thinkin' haid, Brother Shivers. But what is all this heah talky-talk leadin' at?"

"This ways: We is got to make Spinola choose betwix' us, an' choose quick."

Luscious shrugged.

"She ain't gwine do it."

"Is you ever ast her to marry you, Luscious?"

"Ev'ry night I goes there."

"What does she answer you?"

"Says she don't know which she loves bestes' — I or you; an' she's done het up with bein' frightened that she is gwine marry one of us an' then 'scover she is got the wrong one. Says she ma'ied the wrong one fust time she tried it, an' a burnt dawg never bites."

"Same like what she tells me," seconded Mr. Shivers. "The p'int I is makin' is that she cain't marry both of us. Fust place it's ag'in the law, an' secon' place 'tain't decint."

"No-o," reflected Luscious, "I don't hahdly reckon she'd do that."

"An' she kinder likes us both," continued Mr. Shivers, "though I cain't see what they is bouten you, Luscious, which she can care fo'. Anyway, we is jes' nachelly got to make her choose which."

"Tha's a good idee, Brother Shivers, 'ceptin' on'y that it ain't gwine wuk."

"Yes, 'tis, Luscious, an' heah's how: We is made a mistake all along. You is went there an' preposed to her. Then after you is gone I is went an' preposed. An' when on'y one of us is there, the one which ain't there looks better, see?"

“Yeh, but ——”

“Now heahs my plan: T’night I an’ you is gwine to see Spinola t’gether an’ we is gwine prepose to her at the same time. Come thataway there won’t be no cumfution in her min’. She c’n look us over both the same time an’ decide right prompt. ’Tain’t hahdly fair nowadays to ’spec’ a woman to ’member all ’bout one man which ain’t with her while t’other is preposin’. What you is got to say bouten my scheme, Luscious?”

“Both go there t’gether an’ prepose at the same time?” interrogated Luscious doubtfully.

“Yeah! What you think bouten it?”

“I dunno — dunno. I ain’t never done nothin’ liken to that befo’.”

“Co’se not, you ain’t. But I is contendin’ that it’s a elegant plan.”

Luscious descended into a slough of thought. The proposition was alluring. Doubt as to his matrimonial fate had been exciting Luscious almost as much as a cockfight. He was sincerely fond of the Widow Reed and was too human to forget entirely her five thousand dollars. Better to be rejected definitely than to be kept in torturing uncertainty.

As for the dapper and immaculate George Shivers, he bent forward from the wait, focused his gaze upon Luscious and willed that dark individual to agree to the plan. There was more than a little method in Mr. Shivers’ seeming madness. It was

a deep-laid scheme to eliminate Luscious teetotally. Sitting by the side of Luscious in the Reed manse, he felt that he would fairly scintillate by comparison. Even Luscious' best friend could not claim for that gentleman a distant cousinship with any one who had ever heard of Beau Brummell. Clothes, so far as Luscious was concerned, were designed for the sole purpose of preventing nudity, and that task accomplished their mission in life was at an end. That they might serve for decorative purposes seldom occurred to Luscious, and then only under spur of great mental stress. He had been known to call in cow-eyed adoration upon Spinola, clad in overalls.

But if Luscious was indifferent to dress, George Shivers lived for it. He was glorious enough in civilian attire, but in his chauffeur's uniform of military cut there was about him a certain élan that was irresistible. And it was with the intention of slamming home the impossible contrast between Luscious and himself that George proposed the simultaneous declaration of love to Spinola Reed. With the pair of them on exhibition there was little doubt in the scheming mind of Mr. Shivers as to whom Spinola would choose.

And finally Luscious voiced his decision. He spoke slowly, weightily:

"'Tain't such a wuss scheme, Brother Shivers."

George strove to conceal his wild exultation.

"An' you is gwine with me to propose t'gether?"

"Yes," returned Luscious, "I is gwine with you."

George made a lightning getaway. Luscious turned happily back to the fretful Gaffer, Spinola all but forgotten until the hour should have arrived for the joint and several proposal.

Not so George. He hustled to the corner, entered his employer's limousine, shot downtown to wait that gentleman's pleasure, took him home, procured leave of absence for the evening and hastened to his boarding house. And there he gave himself over to an orgy of personal adornment — a long-drawn-out session with razor and perfumed soap and odoriferous toilet water. George was applying a sartorial polish calculated to sweep the heart of Spinola from its moorings.

At precisely fifteen minutes before eight o'clock the men met at a designated corner. The contrast was striking. George Shivers of an immaculateness that fairly shrieked, his buttonhole burdened with a pink carnation, left hand decorated with a blazing stone that gave evidence of having been born not far from a glass factory, and right hand gripping a one-pound box of candy. Apparently Luscious had given small thought to his outward appearance. If he believed in the doctrine that clothes do not make the man, he certainly had the courage of his convictions; for under the converse of that theory Luscious would have ranked as a torn deuce in a deck of new face cards.

His coat was rusty where it had once been dark

blue. It fitted him several months too late. The patched brown trousers caressed the unbeautiful lines of his limbs, exhibiting them to worst advantage. One button of his frayed shirt had vanished into the limbo of forgotten things and the necktie had been carelessly tied wrong side out. A battered derby vied illy with the pearl-grey felt hat perched so jauntily on the side of Mr. Shivers' head.

Yet despite the difference in dress both men were keen for personal success. Spinola was worth it. She was worth a good deal more than that and her virtues were not to be catalogued in a mere breath.

As a housewife she was second to few. She kept a clean, cozy, comfortable place; she cooked amazingly well; she was thrifty, yet not close; and though no promising candidate in a beauty contest, there were many younger women far less restful to the eyes.

And, too, there was the little matter of the late Mr. Reed to be considered. Mr. Reed, in life, had been no prideful addition to the coloured community. In fact, it had been said on good authority that he had once introduced the practice of pugilism into his home. Only once — a very sad once. Mr. Reed left home suddenly and remained left. And it was during the months-long estrangement that he had grown too familiar with a moving freight train. His demise did two things: It resulted in a perfectly elegant funeral managed by

the Over the River Burying Society, and it brought to light an unheard-of policy in a reg'lar insurance company, which policy was fully paid and had run less than one year. The company promptly paid unto Mrs. Spinola Reed, as beneficiary, the sum of three thousand dollars. Despite his domestic troubles Mr. Reed had neglected to change the beneficiary and the company had no choice in the matter, there being small doubt that Mr. Reed was entirely defunct.

Following which Spinola voiced her claim for loss of services of her husband and the ensuing mental anguish in the sum of twenty thousand dollars. Lawyer Evans Chew handled the case. The railroad listened attentively to the impassioned story of Spinola's overwhelming grief and settled out of court for twenty-five hundred dollars. Lawyer Chew pocketed five hundred as a fee and turned over the other two thousand to the happy grief-stricken widow.

She became the victim of immediate siege by every unattached designing male in the community. But being experienced, she was wary. After a time it became evident to all that there were only two candidates who counted: George Shivers and Luscious Chester.

Friends and neighbours couldn't understand. Only Mrs. Spinola Reed understood — and she understood, too, why she could not choose between them. It would have been a lead-pipe cinch were

t'other dear charmer away, but t'other dear charmer stuck closer than a mustard plaster. Each had strong points and glaring weaknesses. Spinola was torn between romance and common sense.

George Shivers frankly dazzled her with his elegance and pre-eminence in dark circles. He had an air, a polish, an urbanity which she yearned to appropriate into the family. But on the other hand he was extremely short on any ambition that meant hard work. He held too many different jobs in too short a space of time. He made an extremely presentable chauffeur and experienced little difficulty in landing on his feet.

But remaining there was quite another matter. And Spinola had survived a hectic experience with one vacillating husband. She had little mind for another.

Luscious Chester on the other hand was nothing if not steady-going. Trouble with him was that he was too durned steady. For years he had held a humble but regular job in a coal yard. During off hours he assisted Cap'n Jackson Ramsay in caring for his game chickens, and he made more than a few dollars from the latter source by way of wagers. Not that Spinola was passionately enamoured of cock-fighting, but she did view with intransigent approval Luscious' constancy to vocation and avocation. She yearned for stability round her home and plenty of it.

So she found herself in a position of being un-

willing to relinquish the grandeur of Mr. Shivers for the solidity of Luscious; or to pass up the reliable Luscious for the brummagem brilliance of Mr. Shivers.

She received her suitors effusively. As she ushered them into the parlour Mr. Shivers handed her the pound of candy. She thanked him gushingly. Luscious scratched his head.

"Dawg-gawn!" he remarked tactfully. "I never thought of bringin' nothin' like that!"

Mr. Shivers was glowing triumphantly as he and Luscious took seats on a sofa the upholstery of which had long since seen its day. Spinola went to the phonograph and a dose of the latest jazz music spurted into the room. They all waited with ill-concealed impatience until it was finished. Then Spinola turned off the machine and seated herself in a rocking-chair opposite them.

The men were nervous. They said nothing. Spinola, sensing a climax, said the same thing.

Mr. Shivers broke the silence. He cleared his throat. Then he nudged Luscious. Luscious fidgeted. Mr. Shivers spoke sotto voce: "G'wan, Luscious — you say it!"

Luscious opened his lips, closed them, opened them again. Nothing save a restrained hiss issued. Finally: "Can't!" he choked hopelessly and relapsed into jellyfishy apathy.

It was plainly up to Mr. Shivers. He had foreseen this and fancied that it would be reasonably

easy. But with the mute and trembling Luscious beside him on the sofa and the keen-eyed, interested Spinola opposite he found himself grossly deserted by his gift of gab. He essayed circumlocution; "We is pow'ful glad to be heah with you this evenin', Missis Reed."

"I is glad to have you, Mistuh Shivers — both."

"Yeh, ain't it the truth?"

"Ain't it?"

"Er — a — we is both heah ——"

"Yeh, ain't you now?"

"Yeah!" blurted Luscious desperately, feeling it incumbent upon him to say something. "We is!"

"We both come t'gether," went on Mr. Shivers, "to ast you a question."

"Is you?" cooly.

"Yeh," interjected Luscious hoarsely, determined not to be left in the cold. "We both is — the same question."

"How awful int'rusting," remarked Spinola. "Wha's it about?"

"Us," said Mr. Shivers.

"Yeh — we," groaned Luscious.

"An' you, Missis Reed."

"An' you," came the doleful echo.

Judging by the words that did not come in the next few minutes, the question had been argued and disposed of. Luscious continued to fidget, happened to glance at his feet, noticed that they

were entirely too large for any prospective husband and wildly tried to conceal them beneath the sofa. He failed signally.

Spinola, secretly delighted with the unusual situation, reintroduced the apparently forgotten subject.

"Bouten you-all an' I?"

"Yeah!"

"What about us?"

"We wan's," choked Mr. Shivers valiantly—
"we wan's you to marry us!"

"Me," corrected Luscious fearfully.

"An' me!" followed Mr. Shivers.

Spinola stiffened.

"Both?" she cried in horror.

"Either!"

"Oh! Tha's diff'ent."

"Yeh," agreed Luscious. "Ain't it?"

Spinola checked off the facts on her fingers.

"You is both preposin' ma'iage to me t'gether, ain't it?"

"Yeah!"

"An' I is to choose betwix' you?"

"Yassum. Right now."

Spinola cogitated intensively. "This is a mos' unusual preposition fo' a gal to be in."

"Yassum. Sho' is. Tha's why we think yo'd do sumthin'."

"'Tain't ve'y romantic."

"It's two times as romantic as one man pre-

posin'. An' besides we is both tried romantics an' they ain't got us nowhere."

Spinola's lips came together firmly.

"This heah ain't no way to co't no gal. S'posin' I was to assept one of you, t'other one would haf to leave befo' I could git my 'gagement kiss — an' that would be turrible embarrassin'."

"Yeh, woul'n't it?" agreed Luscious nervously.

"I reckon," intoned Spinola sadly, "that I cain't choose betwix' you now. I sho'ly does reckon not."

"Why?" quizzed Mr. Shivers passionately. "Why you cain't?"

"Fust off, Mistuh Shivers, I ain't use'n to makin' up my min' bout gittin' ma'ied so quick like this. Besides, 'tain't no proper way to do no co'tin'. I is a young woman, Mistuh Shivers, an' I insis's on bein' won."

"You is got to be won?"

"Tha's it. I ma'ies the man which wins me."

Ten minutes later the two dejected suitors left the house. Mr. Shivers set the pace to the corner, stopped, faced Luscious, dived into a trousers pocket and produced a pair of new celluloid dice.

"C'mon," he commanded, "we is gwine shoot high dice — th'ee rolls."

Luscious shook his head in bewilderment.

"Whaffo'?"

"Fo' Spinola."

"Shoot high dice fo' her?"

"Shuah!" snapped Mr. Shivers impatiently.

"Ain't you hearn her say she is gwine ma'y the man which wins her? Ain't you hearn her say them ve'y same words? Now le's one of us win!"

Luscious thought it over. Then he shied.

"No," he negatived, "I ain't gwine do it!"

"Why?"

"'Twoul'n't be respectful."

"Respectful? Huh! She done said she had got to be won."

"Jes' the same," insisted Luscious proudly, "I ain't gwine shoot dice fo' no wife."

George Shivers was up against it. He had been very optimistic on the dice proposition. He was master of the clicking ivory cubes and had been confident of a superior score. He argued, pleaded, cajoled, threatened. Luscious was adamant. Shivers sighed.

"A'right then, Luscious. I is willin' to play you the bes' th'ee out of five han's show-down poker."

"Ain't got no min' fo' no poker."

"But one of us is got to win Spinola, ain't we?"

"Not with no cards n'r neither dice," snapped Luscious, and turned away.

George Shivers sadly watched his rival amble down the street. Mr. Shivers was more than a trifle apprehensive. Spinola insisted upon being won and Luscious denied the opportunity of winning her.

"Dawg-gawn a black man which ain't got no mo'

gamblin' instinc' than what Luscious is got!" soliloquized the disappointed suitor.

In the first place he had been rudely shocked by Spinola's hesitation in the little matter of choosing a husband. He thought considerably less of her taste in matters matrimonial. He couldn't understand how she could look at them side by side and fail to give Luscious his congé. But fail she had, and as a mere matter of masculine pride Mr. Shivers was more than ever determined to win her.

Win her, yes. But how? To win something one must take a chance, and taking a chance on the fair and wealthy widow had no place in Mr. Shivers' scheme of things. Luscious had refused the dice — there Mr. Shivers would have had a little better than a five-hundred-to-one chance. Luscious had declined cards too. And the fact remained that Spinola had to be won.

In the days that followed the radiant and happy widow was impartial in her favours. She submitted to the company of Luscious one night and Mr. Shivers the next. She made a sincere effort to choose between them and failed miserably. The decision, she was determined, must be left to them. Deciding for herself was too great a mental strain and she let it be clearly understood that such a decision, if left to her, would be long delayed.

Luscious, too, had been surprised by their mutual proposal — surprised to learn that he stood an

even chance. He perked up sufficiently to buy a celluloid collar and a rainbowish necktie. He sent her an entire pound of candy at one time. But despite this obvious camouflage he remained Luscious Chester, inordinately fond of his bird, Gaffer, and faithful through all his mental travail to his trust as chief handler for Capt. Jackson Ramsay's prize gamecocks.

Then things veered in Luscious' direction. The gentleman who employed Mr. Shivers — one Mr. Forbes — was called to Montgomery on business, heard from an optimist that the road between Birmingham and that city was in good condition and fared forth in his automobile with a mournful Mr. Shivers at the wheel. He was to be gone five or six days. That meant five or six evenings of uninterrupted association between Luscious and the fair Spinola. Mr. Shivers was fearful that his matrimonial bark was about to be wrecked on the shoals of propinquity.

It wasn't — not that Luscious did not try to make a good crop of hay while the sun of opportunity was shining, but Spinola was both fair and wary. Meanwhile matters of vital import to the trio were occurring in Montgomery.

It started in the lobby of the Gay-Teague Hotel, where Mr. Forbes bumped into an old college classmate. That gentleman confided to his friend that on the following morning there was to be a magnificent cocking main between birds from Mont-

gomery and birds from Mobile. The friend had the honour of owning all the Montgomery entries and would Mr. Forbes attend? Mr. Forbes would. What is more, he did. And it was Mr. George Shivers who drove the car to the battle ground and so was a fascinated spectator at the main.

At first he was indifferent — a most unusual condition for Mr. Shivers. He didn't understand what it was all about and he didn't particularly care. Wherefore he did not enter the dilapidated barn where the game-cocks belonging to Mr. Forbes' friend were caged and so did not hear a conversation which concerned the first battle.

"How about the first match?" questioned Mr. Forbes.

His friend laughed.

"Don't bet a nickel on it!" He pointed to a magnificent red cock that was crowing loudly and defiantly. "There's my entry."

"Fine-looking bird."

"He is fine. Best cock I've ever pitted."

"Yet you advise me not to bet on him?"

"Exactly. That bird yonder — Trojan is his name — has already won four battles. I'm pitting him today with the wild idea that he might make it five wins. That would be a record for me. But, of course, he hasn't a chance. A cock, you know, is best in his first fight. In every succeeding fight he gets less good. Trojan, you see, has been cut up pretty badly in the past."

“I see. And you’re taking a chance on losing him in order to establish a record for yourself?”

“Precisely. Trojan will lose — but there is always the long chance. And it would be an enormous satisfaction to have bred a bird capable of five victorious fights.”

It was not until the birds had been spurred and the signal given for the commencement of the first fight that Mr. Shivers conscripted any interest in the proceedings. He timidly approached the pit and placed himself in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Forbes. His employer’s friend was inside the canvas-lined pit, holding Trojan tenderly in his arms. George Shivers’ eyes fell upon the bird and popped open. He remembered vaguely having seen the cock before. He addressed his boss.

“What that rooster is name’, suh?”

“Which one?”

“That big red one yo’ frien’ is holdin’?”

“Trojan. Why?”

“Golly Moses! He’s the ve’y imige of a bird I knows, name of Gaffer. How much he weigh?”

“Five pounds.”

“So do Gaffer.”

“Fine bird, that Trojan. Fighting blood all the way through. This is his fifth fight. He won the first four.”

“Won ’em all?”

“Yes.”

“Wigglin’ wil’cats! That sho’ mus’ be the fightenes’ cock!”

The voice of the referee broke quietly in on the buzz of chatter. “Pit your birds, gentlemen!”

The handlers brought their birds together and allowed them to peck at one another. Then they were pitted, their two-and-a-quarter-inch steel gaffs glittering menacingly in the sunlight. Of a sudden there was a swish-swa-a-ash-swish as their bodies catapulted through the air and came together. Both went down. And the friend of Mr. Shivers’ employer forgot his dignity and emitted a cry of triumph.

“In you!” he exclaimed in the parlance of the cockpit. “It means a clean win!”

It had been a lucky double stroke; a stroke such as wins for a bird on the initial clash. The spurs had passed cleanly through the head of Trojan’s enemy. The end of the bout was a foregone conclusion to the wise-acres clustered about the pit. The affair lasted scarcely five minutes.

“Five victories!” exulted the owner of Trojan. “I reckon that’s a bird for you!”

George Shivers stared in trembling awe. Five victories! He didn’t know that this win had been the worst sort of fluke and that Trojan’s owner had risked not a penny on his chances. Nor did he know that a fighting cock is at his best in his first fight; that he fights by instinct and that every cut-

ting he gets weakens his stamina, however much of his marvellous gameness he may retain. All Mr. Shivers knew was that he was having an idea. Trojan was the size and weight of Gaffer. Mr. Shivers could see no physical difference between the birds — not so much as a feather. And Gaffer — no matter how elegantly bred — was a young inexperienced fighter, while — to Mr. Shivers' way of thinking — Trojan was a wise old veteran who knew all the tricks of the trade.

In the breast of Mr. Shivers there was born the overwhelming desire to become possessed of Trojan, to carry him to Birmingham and strike Luscious Chester in his Achilles' tendon. He planned to induce the unsuspecting Luscious to wager his property rights in Spinola Reed on the outcome of a battle between his bird and Trojan. That was the one thing in the world that Luscious could not resist. Cockfighting was the wine of life to him. He was of the type to wager his very life or his only shirt on such an event. And of course, speculated Mr. Shivers blithely, Luscious would never suspect that Trojan was a veteran bird certain to win over the young and inexperienced Gaffer.

It dovetailed perfectly with Mr. Shivers' determination to take no chances of losing Spinola. He couldn't help chuckling at the certainty of success, provided he could buy Trojan. He edged close to the pit where the beatifically defunct ex-opponent

of Trojan lay in state, and gave vent to a dolorous sigh.

“My goshgolly! I wisht I owned that there Trojan!”

His employer turned smilingly.

“What’s that, George?”

“I says I wisht I owned that there Trojan.”

Such unmistakable desire shone from Mr. Shivers’ eyes that his boss was visibly affected. He asked no embarrassing questions, but presumed that Mr. Shivers was a wise and inveterate cock-fighter who desired the noble Trojan for breeding purposes. He knew that Trojan had fought at least three fights beyond his time — a fact of which Mr. Shivers was happily unaware.

“How much are you willing to pay for him, George?”

“How much you would sigges’, boss man?”

“Ten dollars?”

George gasped. Ten dollars! He had vaguely imagined that blooded fighting cocks brought prices closer to a hundred.

“Y-y-yassuh! I sho’ will take him if’n you c’n git him fo’ that. I’ll make it fifteen too, suh.”

Five minutes later Mr. Forbes returned.

“He’s yours, George, at eight dollars!”

For a second the earth stood still and the planets sang a chorus to the exalted Mr. Shivers. An expression of ineffable beatitude crossed his light-brown face. In his mind’s eye there flashed the

roseate panorama of the immediate future; his return to Birmingham, the breaking down of Luscious' maidenly reserve by the suggestion of a cock-fight with Spinola and her fortune as the stakes, and then the battle itself with Trojan an easy winner over Gaffer.

Mr. Shivers wasn't taking a chance. He knew he wasn't. Not for one fleeting instant did he conceive the possibility of defeat.

Wherefore he watched the other fights with keenest interest. He listened attentively to the patter of the pit and absorbed it as a sponge absorbs water. Also he learned the elementary rules that govern the fights. And that night he dreamed gorgeous dreams of victory and Spinola and a life of luxurious ease.

When Mr. Shivers drove over Red Mountain and descended into Birmingham the following afternoon the valorous Trojan was safe in a capacious basket in the tonneau of the car. Mr. Forbes had brought two friends with him from Montgomery and so there had been no opportunity for conversation about the bird, in which Mr. Shivers would inevitably have learned that the bird he had purchased was good only for breeding and a certain victim to Gaffer, should the two meet. He learned none of that and carried Trojan tenderly to his boarding house, where he procured from an indulgent landlady exclusive possession of a hitherto deserted chicken run in the back yard. There he

installed Trojan in state. Then he called upon Spinola Reed.

She greeted him warmly. He eyed her possessively, as one regards a certain and prospective wife. So masterful was he that he came within one red ace of sweeping her from her feet. It was truly a glorious evening for Mr. Shivers. The immediate future loomed bright and rosy and it was with ill-concealed impatience that he drove his employer to the office the following morning and attended to a few errands. Once freed, he broke all speed ordinances in traversing the distance between the Brown-Marx Building and the coal yard where Luscious labored.

Luscious did not exactly rave with delight at sight of his returned rival; nor did he respond with any noticeable degree of warmth to Mr. Shivers' friendly overtures. Mr. Shivers' absence had grossly discouraged Luscious. He was very apprehensive that Spinola was not destined for his long muscular arms.

Mr. Shivers brought up the subject tactfully. He again suggested rolling high dice for Spinola, following with a second offer of settling the controversy with show-down poker. Luscious was steadfast in his refusal. He was quite sure that no such arrangement could possibly be respectful, and yet he admitted that Spinola must be won.

"You ain't much gamblin' man, is you, Luscious?"

"Not so ve'y much."

"I reckon you never bets a-tall."

"Reckon I does — sometimes."

"Which times?"

"Cockfights!"

"Huh! You think you knows a heap bonten roosters, don't you?"

Mr. Shivers was striking very close to where Luscious lived, and the little coal yarder bristled with more than a hint of belligerence.

"I knows mo'n some folks heahabouts does."

"Name' which?"

"Mistuh George Shivers!"

Mr. Shivers threw back his head and laughed derisively.

"Haw! What you knows 'bout fightin' cocks — ain't! Tha's what it is — it ain't! You don't know nothin' 'bout nothin'! I ain't posin' as no espert, but I is got sense enought to see that that bird of yourn, name of Gaffer, coul'n't whip a lame duck!"

That was the insult supreme. Luscious glowered. His habitual cloak of friendliness was doffed in a split second.

"Wha's that you reemahks, cullud man?"

"I says you don't know nothin' bouten no chickens, an' fu'thermo' you ain't got sense enough to see that Gaffer ain't wuth a hoot!"

"Folks which makes statemints like that is got to back 'em up or eat 'em up."

"I ain't hongry at presint."

"Then you is got to back what you says bouten Gaffer."

"Says which?"

"You is got to prove that Gaffer ain't no good — which he is — or else you is got to swally them words, an' swally 'em whole!"

"My swallyin' app'ratus ain't wukkin today. I says Gaffer ain't no good an' I says that he cain't lick nothin' an' that I c'n prove it."

Luscious was wrought to fighting pitch.

"Prove it how?"

"Huh! Tha's easy. I c'n go down to the market on Fo'th Avenue and buy a rooster which c'n lick him."

Sacrilege!

"You thinks you c'n git a rooster to lick Gaffer?"

"You done said it!"

"A five-poun' cock — give or take two ounces?"

"Right the fust time."

"An' you is ready to bet on it?"

"I is!" Mr. Shivers gave an excellent imitation of a man having an idea: "I is willin' to bet Spinola on it — an' cash also!"

Luscious was nobody's absolute fool. He studied Mr. Shivers intently. It became plain to him that Mr. Shivers had something up his sleeve, and Luscious guessed instantly and correctly that Mr. Shivers had already purchased a gamecock for the

purpose of matching him against Gaffer. More, Mr Shivers — who Luscious knew was ignorant of birds — had doubtlessly been well touted and thought he had a sure thing.

Luscious concealed a smile of elation. The idea of any gamecock whipping Gaffer without the aid of seven or eleven miracles was ludicrous. Luscious continued to smile inwardly. Unwilling as he had been to roll high dice or play cards with Spinola as the stakes, he felt that he could pay her no greater or more delicate compliment than to let her future be placed on the glistening spurs of his beloved Gaffer. The idea made an irresistible appeal to his sense of knight-errantry. There would be a worthy cockfight — a stake worthy putting Gaffer in the lists! Surely no woman could be won in a nobler way!

Luscious — metamorphosed now that cockfighting was the subject — dickered craftily. He practically dictated terms. Not only was Spinola to be at stake, but each man was to post fifty dollars with Florian Slappey, who was agreed upon as referee, Florian being the ultimate word in matters sporting.

By the time the deal was closed both men were chuckling with triumph — each supremely confident of victory and bliss. The fight was scheduled to take place on the following Tuesday afternoon in the shelter of a dank and deserted barn not far from Rosedale.

Florian Slappey was approached on the refereeing question. He accepted with an alacrity that stamped him as one not averse to a spotlight position. Each man put up fifty dollars in cash with him, the whole to become the property of the winner. Rules were agreed upon. Then Mr. Shivers returned to his chauffeuring and Luscious to his coal yarding, blissfully content in the certitude of triumph and a life of rich domestic happiness.

News of the coming event seeped through Darktown and close on its heels the fascinating details of the circumstances surrounding it. It made an instant and enormous appeal. Here surely was a stake worthy the steel of any bird! And eventually Sis Callie Flukers, professional gossip, heard of it and indignantly carried the story to Mrs. Spinola Reed.

Contrary to Sis Callie's fondest expectations, Spinola was delighted. She waxed enthusiastic at the inevitable social prominence. Spinola dismissed the disappointed Sis Callie and sent for Mr. Shivers. She requested details. She got them in one great verbose gob.

"Who is gwine win?" she asked pertinently.

Mr. Shivers grinned.

"Tha's a plumb foolish question, Missis Reed. You don' hahdly reckon I'd take a chance of losin' you, does you? They ain't gwine be on'y one bird in this heah fight — an' tha's my Trojan. Gaffer ain't got nary teeny chance. Betwix' I an' you,

Spinola, I is jus' bet another sevumty dollars on Trojan. Tha's gwine pay fo' our honeymoon."

Spinola blushed modestly.

"You hush!"

"You is countin' on 'bidin' by the decision of this heah cockfight, ain't you?"

"I reckon."

"An' it's un'erstood that when I wins I comes an' claims you?"

"Sposin' Luscius wins?"

"He ain't gwine do such."

"But if'n he does — I is got to 'bide by Luscius jus' as much as I 'bides by you."

Mr. Shivers nodded.

"I ain't makin' no kick. I is a dead game loser, I is. 'Ceptin' on'y that I never loses."

As the day of the fight drew closer interest multiplied. Owners of the rival gamecocks became centres of respectful interest. Each was flattered for private tips. Their answers became stereotyped. Said Mr. Shivers: "If'n you desires to reelize one hund'ed pre cent on yo' 'vestment quick an' sho', bet on Trojan."

Luscius was a trifle more conservative:

"I ain't saw Trojan an' I ain't pretickerly care 'bout seein' him. But Chuesday night sumbody is gwine have a gamecock dinner an' the big dish ain't gwine be name' Gaffer."


It was a case of produce your money and take your choice. For every dollar that appeared in

support of one bird, its mate immediately came to light to cover it. There was a frenzied scramble for invitations to witness the battle. It was understood that Spinola was to be there. Florian Slappety had thoughtfully arranged for the use of an armchair which was to be placed immediately outside the canvas walls of the cockpit.

Luscious spent the two days preceding the fight in hard scientific conditioning work. He pitted Gaffer against one of Jackson Ramsay's best, both birds spurred with chamois dummies. Gaffer covered himself with glory. He fought the bird against his best hat, with results disastrous to the headgear. He put him in a walk for a day and shuffled him constantly. Monday evening found Gaffer in as perfect trim for battle as ever gamecock was.

Mr. Shivers on the other hand did less work with his bird and more with his mouth. He entertained not the slightest apprehension as to the outcome of the fight. He had seen the veteran Trojan fight. Victor in five battles, it was inconceivable that any amateur rooster could send him down for the eternal count.

And so Mr. Shivers oozed cocksureness. He fairly dripped confidence and optimism, until he happened to ask Boston Marble, betting agent in the central section of Darktown for Jackson Ramsay's gambling establishment, whether Boston was betting on Gaffer or Trojan. Boston was known



as a connoisseur on gamecocks and a tight-lipped man.

"You wan's to know?" he inquired.

"I sholy does."

"Ise bettin' on Gaffer."

Mr. Shivers' eyelids flickered with surprise, not unmingled with contempt for the other's judgment.

"Says which?"

"Gaffer."

"My bird is name' Trojan."

"I knows it."

"An' you is bettin' on Luscious Chester's bird?"

"Ise layin' odds when I cain't git my bets covered no other way."

Something was wrong — radically so. Mr. Shivers realized that fact very suddenly. The smile vanished from his face for the first time since his acquisition of Trojan in Montgomery.

"Why?" he questioned fearfully.

Boston Marble's reply came briefly and pointedly and there was no doubting the ring of sincerity:

"Because Trojan ain't got a chance against Luscious' bird!"

Mr. Shivers' lower jaw dropped. His eyes popped open with horror. And then he most passionately demanded an explanation.

He got it — straight from the shoulder. Boston Marble told him pointedly that the best fight in the career of a good gamecock is his first fight. He showed clearly that every fight in which Trojan

had participated since his maiden appearance had taken just that much out of him.

"They ain't but so many fights in a rooster," proclaimed Boston, "an' Trojan's was done used up long ago."

"He — he looks good." .

"Co'se he looks good — don' even show a scar. But they is there jus' the same. They is hid by the feathers so nobody but a espert could see 'em. An', b'lieve me, w'en you pits Trojan 'gainst a young bird like Gaffer, 'tain't gwine take you so long to fin' they is there. Trojan ain't on'y gwine be fightin' Luscious' bird — he is gwine be fightin' Gaffer an' them other five roosters which he has done licked."

"But the white gen'leman what done sol' him to me ——" wailed Mr. Shivers.

"He thought you was gwine breed with him — not fight him."

"An' I ain't got a chance?"

"Not no more'n seven on the secon' roll — barrin' on'y a mackerel don' happen."

Mr. Shivers begged and pleaded for one single word of encouragement. Not one was forthcoming. And Mr. Shivers knew that Boston Marble knew whereof he spoke. A great black pall settled damply over Mr. Shivers' shoulders and when he parted from the mournful betting agent he was in a cold sweat of terror. He went home to think it over. He found that task excruciating easy.

He couldn't very well think of anything else.

In the first place Boston Marble had convinced him that this was Trojan's last night on earth. And that meant that not only was Luscious to come into immediate possession of a five-thousand-dollar estate and the good-looking housewifely widow who accompanied it, but Mr. Shivers would find himself utterly and completely stripped of money by the setting of another sun.

Mr. Shivers was not happy. He realized sadly that he had been hoist by the petard of his own overconfidence. He was in the grip of a great gooey gob of gloom. The postulation of the betting agent had shivered his cosmic scheme—flooy! Perhaps Boston was wrong. Mr. Shivers slapped hat on head and streaked toward Eighteenth Street. There in rapid succession he interviewed three men who were recognized as authorities on the subject of cockfighting. To each he presented a hypothetical case the facts of which were identical with his own dilemma: A rooster, victor in five desperate battles, pitted against a well-blooded youngster meeting his first foe. The verdict was unanimous and discouraging. Thumbs were down against Trojan.

Mr. Shivers meandered sadly back to his room. He looked like a fatal accident going somewhere to happen. He seated himself limply in an old Morris chair, which various and sundry moths had

loved not wisely but too well, and gave himself over to a session of deep thinking.

Mr. Shivers was not a quitter. He so informed himself several times by way of encouragement. The trouble was that he appeared to have no option in the matter. He was already quitted!

Yet somewhere, somehow, he knew that there must be a mode of egress from his distressing plight. He entertained the idea of hedging his bets and so saving a little something from the impending disaster, but that course was closed to him for two valid reasons: First, he couldn't raise another cent with which to hedge; and second, he did not fool himself that his hypothetical case had not been translated into terms of the actual. He was sure that the true story had already been bruited about among the wagering fraternity. Mr. Shivers felt that he had been immersed in cold dark soup. He pillowed his aching head in a pair of palsied hands and groaned.

"Mistuh Shivers," he soliloquized, "what it takes to git stung good an' plenty—you is got it! What you ain't got is no brains, an' all bein' fair in love ——"

Mr. Shivers raised his head suddenly. Very abruptly the mournful soliloquy ended. An idea came full panoplied from the void and smote him hip and thigh. It smote him a terrifically hard smite. He staggered mentally.

"All's fair in love," he repeated musingly. "Gee golly! I'm durned if it ain't!"

His mind leaped to the tableau of several days since — Luscious and Gaffer in the rear of the house where Luscious boarded. He recalled the competent way in which Luscious had handled his bird. And what is still more important, he visualized Gaffer. One fact stood out in glittering, irresistible allure:

Trojan and Gaffer looked sufficiently alike to have been born of the same egg! And following that startling premise to a glorious conclusion, if Trojan could be substituted for Gaffer no one would know the difference.

The potentialities of the scheme almost frightened him. If it was possible! If only — the broken spirit of Mr. Shivers mended rapidly. Here was something tangible with which to work. If Trojan could be substituted for Gaffer — no possibility of telling the difference — all's fair in love —

It was that all's-fair-in-love business that hypnotized him, principally because he wanted to be hypnotized to still the qualms of conscience. He went into executive session with himself. Within ten minutes he was convinced that Luscious had done him dirt. Luscious knew all about gamecocks, while he — George Shivers — did not. And Luscious was taking gross advantage of him in staking the matrimonial future of both on the

stroke of a spur, after having in most cowardly fashion refused to settle the matter of honour with dice or cards, via either of which routes Mr. Shivers would have been blissfully at home.

There wasn't a doubt of it. Mr. Shivers argued violently and steadfastly with himself from the pro angle. There was no other side to the debate. In a marvellously brief space of time he was convinced that in borrowing Luscious' bird until the following evening he was performing an act of charity.

"Tha's all what I is gwine do," he extenuated. "I ain't takin' ol' Gaffer fo' keeps. I is borryin' him an' leavin' Trojan fo' s'curity. Trojan is good s'curity. He done cos' me eight dollars, f. o. b. Montgomery. An' sence we is doin' this fo' Spinola, I is shuah that she is gwine be a heap happier ma'ied to me than to Luscious. Besides, his rooster ain't gwine git kilt noways, so he won't be nothin' out."

His logic soothed, and so — girded about by righteousness — Mr. Shivers busied himself with practicalities. The situation demanded grim-jawed determination and Mr. Shivers was desperate. He doffed his handsome grey suit and slipped into one that had done yeoman service in the days when Mr. Shivers had been handy man round a garage. It was a suit designed to blend nicely with the darkness, a suit of considerably lower visibility than the one he hung carefully in the golden-oak chifforobe.

Five minutes later an entirely dark figure, clutching a basket under the right arm, eased noiselessly from the house and was lost in the gloomy shadows of the trees that lined the sidewalk. He made his way rapidly across town.

Darktown slumbered. The faint glow of a new moon filtered gently through the leaves. The corner arcs glowed brightly, marking spaces where Mr. Shivers accelerated his pace and lowered his head. A few late automobiles thrummed their homeward ways, a street car jangled southward. From somewhere there came to the ears of the nervous pedestrian the pellucid cacophony of a quartette accompanied by mandolin and guitar.

Mr. Shivers was not exactly nervous. He was scared green. But he was fighting in his last ditch and relying upon his leg power in case things broke wrong.

He rounded the corner of the block upon which lived Luscious Chester and the unsuspecting Gaffer. He hugged tightly against his breast the small basket in which a living thing moved uncomfortably — a thing that was the hero of many glorious pit battles and was down on the books under the name of Trojan.

Of a sudden he disappeared. The Stygian alley had swallowed him up. The block-long row of houses was steeped in blackness impenetrable as velvet. The very air seemed permeated with

menace. Mr. Shivers paused, hesitated, turned back, paused again, thought of Spinola and the future and continued his nefarious way.

He counted houses; counted the grim silhouettes until he reached the seventh from the corner. He noiselessly opened the gate connecting alley and back yard and slipped within. There he ceased to navigate and reflected terrifiedly upon the error of his ways. But he had progressed too far now to be deterred by mere physical fright. Hugging tightly the basket that contained Trojan, he snoped forward. Groping, trembling fingers touched chicken wire. He fingered gingerly until he found a latch. There was no lock. He lifted it noiselessly. He stumbled once, caught himself and his breath, then proceeded again,—fearful, jumpy, determined.

And finally he entered the chicken house where Gaffer ruled in lone dignity. He found Luscious' prize rooster sleeping peacefully on the roost. He lifted Trojan from the basket and placed him beside Gaffer. Then he lifted Gaffer quietly, efficiently, authoritatively. By some miracle there was no raucous squawk from Gaffer.

Holding Gaffer tightly in the basket he backed through the door of the chicken run. He felt his way with exultant care into the alley again, thence to the street. There he began to walk, and the more he walked the faster he travelled. But the

ground seemed to be passing underfoot with snail-like slowness. He looked round. No one was in sight.

It was then that terror incarnate gripped Mr. Shivers and shook him. He threw discretion to the winds and ran!

He was panting and exhausted when he reached his room. He uncovered the basket and gazed within. Gaffer blinked surprisedly at him. There wasn't a doubt that it was Gaffer. And now that danger of detection had passed, Mr. Shivers' spirits sky-rocketed and he was conscious of a feeling of exaltation. He even chuckled. He was a man of parts, he was; a man ingenious enough to rise above the clutch of adverse circumstance.

He stepped boldly through the hall and into the little back yard. He made his way to the chicken coop and placed Gaffer safely within. Then he returned to the house, undressed and slipped contentedly between the sheets. He slept peacefully — happy in the knowledge of worthy and difficult work well done.

At seven o'clock he rose, dressed and bade his fighting rooster good morning. Then he made his way to the Blue Star Café for Coloured Ladies and Gents, where he inhaled a generous portion of ham and eggs, two mammoth cups of coffee and four slices of crisp crumbly toast. He passed from there to Bud Peaglar's Barbecue Lunch Room and Billiard Parlour and engaged the languid, limpy

proprietor thereof in earnest conversation, as the result of which Bud telephoned Mr. Forbes and told lugubriously of a horrible malady that had suddenly stricken Mr. Shivers, making it impossible for him to work that day.

Mr. Shivers went home once again. He again inspected the big red rooster in the chicken coop. The bird was scratching gravel in a manner inspiringly peppy. Mr. Shivers was elated. He left strict orders that no one was to be allowed near the bird and went downtown again. This time he visited a loan man and raised twenty dollars on his watch and ring. With this he sought Boston Marble.

"You was remahkin' yestiddy, Brother Marble, that yo'd give odds on Luscius' bird, wa'n't you?"

"Yeah!"

"You still feel that way bouten it?"

"Reckon so."

"What odds?"

"Lis'en heah, Brother Shivers, you ain't cal'latin' on bettin' no mo' money on Trojan, is you?"

The humour of the situation suddenly struck Mr. Shivers amidships. He laughed out loud.

"I asts you what odds you offers, Brother Marble?"

"Two to one."

"I takes you fo' twenty."

"An' I takes you fo' a durn' fool!" snapped

Boston disgustedly as he accepted the two ten-dollar notes and entered a forty-twenty bet in his book. "You is gwine be a wiser man by t'night, Brother Shivers — an' a broker one."

"Mebbe so — mebbe so," returned Mr. Shivers tolerantly. "But don' you fohgit, Brother Marble, that them what laughs first laughs last!"

The sun travelled slowly toward its zenith, passed it and then started a general exodus with Mrs. Spinola Reed as the radiant chief exoduster. Two successive Edgewood cars were jammed to capacity by an eager, excited, dusky crowd which paid little heed to the beauties of the panorama spread beneath them as the trolley crawled over Red Mountain, passed through the gap and descended toward the negro town of Rosedale, which nestles at the foot of the mountain on the Shades Valley side.

Florian Slappey, resplendent in his dual rôle of master of ceremonies and referee, awaited the car. He was the centre of a throng of admiring Rosedalians, who stood back in respectful awe, paying silent tribute to his tailored elegance.

The car jerked to a halt. With the air of a courier Florian Slappey stepped forward and assisted the giggling Spinola to alight. With her hand tightly clutching his arm he led the way grandiosely toward the old shed in the shade of which the battle was to be staged. The spectators followed at a respectful distance.

More than a hundred of the elect of Birmingham's coloured population crowded into the dilapidated old barn. The scene within was a phantasmagoria of violent colour, shrill chattering and indiscriminate wagering. The women hovered obsequiously over Spinola's chair of state at the side of the six-inch-high canvas inclosure in which the *affaire d'honneur* was to be decided, while the men trampled a trail between headquarters of Luscious and Mr. Shivers. They inspected each bird in turn, commenting wisely upon the good points of each, and usually decided upon which bird they would wager by flipping a coin.

Luscious, earnest and businesslike in a suit of dingy overalls, stood guard over his bird, returning monosyllabic answers to the flood of questions hurled his way. Luscious was decidedly in his element. He looked thoroughly competent.

Mr. Shivers on the other hand was garbed in his ultra best. He fairly bubbled with confidence. He succeeded in borrowing another ten dollars, which he promptly and publicly wagered on his bird. And then amid a hush that could have been heard a half mile away Florian Slapppy stepped into the pit, announced the battle and summoned the principals.

They appeared promptly and proudly, each holding his bird gently in the crook of the left arm. Mr. Shivers simulated the nonchalance which years of experience had given to Luscious. He strove

to imitate the sang-froid of the white gentlemen whom he had seen pitting game cocks in Montgomery. And every once in a while he would sight the bird under Luscious' arm and give a throaty chuckle.

It was really too funny.

"Ol' Trojan fightin' fo' Luscious," he told himself, "an' I is been clevah enough to git his bird to fight fo' me. I reckon brains c'n be used fo' sumthin' beside to have headaches with."

Florian orated long and unctuously about nothing in particular and then inquired if both men were ready. They said they were. Florian stepped over the inclosing wall and seated himself on a three-legged stool.

There was a general rustling about the pit. The crowd surged closer. Spinola hitched forward in her chair, eyes riveted on the two gamecocks, hands pressed to her capacious bosom after the manner of a famous motion-picture actress whom Spinola admired immensely. Interest of the crowd was equally divided between the birds and Spinola. The Widow Reed was tasting the ultima thule of happiness.

Luscious extended his bird toward the one held by Mr. Shivers. They pecked furiously at each other, passions rising. Their legs kicked futilely at empty air, long wicked steel glinting in the half light. Then Florian's voice broke the tense almost painful silence.

“Pit yo’ birds, gen’lemen! Pit yo’ birds!”

Luscious and Mr. Shivers stepped back, stooped and placed their gamecocks gently on the dirt floor of the pit. An audible sigh escaped from Spinola. There was a general intaking of breath by the spectators. The epochal battle was on!

For what seemed an eternity to the overwrought watchers the two roosters glared at one another, every steely muscle in their bodies tensed. Then — action.

There was a flurry, a hurtling of bodies through the air, a spurt of dust, a flash of steel, a vicious fish! floosh! The two birds toppled to the ground and lay there struggling.

Mr. Shivers smiled. The fight was over — he was quite sure of that. Therefore his eyes popped wide when the calmly professional Luscious stepped forward quietly.

“Unhang yo’ bird, Mistuh Shivers. It’s in you!”

Mr. Shivers inspected sceptically. The steel spur was most decidedly in him — in his bird. Luscious’ bird had driven the gaff home with accuracy and power. Mr. Shivers shook his head — accident, of course. One little gaffing didn’t make no neverminds. He knew the veteran bird that Luscious was handling didn’t have the stamina to win.

For thirty seconds the owners handled their birds.

Then Florian Slappey's voice again: "Pit yo' birds!"

Scarcely had they settled themselves when there was the same vicious floosh! This time there was no doubt as to which bird was hung. Mr. Shivers bewilderedly extracted the spur from his bird and lifted the weakening fowl in his arms. Luscious — quiet, self-possessed, unsmiling, confident — handled his rooster tenderly.

The crowd was on the qui vive. Luscious' bird had driven home the first two strokes and even the laymen knew that the early blows in a cockfight are the most decisive. Mr. Shivers' bird was in an exceedingly bad way. Even Spinola knew it. She had small eyes for Mr. Shivers. She was gazing adoringly at the cool competent Luscious; gazing at him as one gazes upon a future husband.

"Pit yo' birds, gen'lemen!"

The birds were placed in the pit. They came together, separated, set themselves and slammed together again. This time they went down.

"In you, Mistuh Shivers," announced Florian. "In yo' bird!"

From a knowing spectator came the soft announcement: "An' that one shuah ends the fight! That finishes Brother Shivers' bird!"

It did. The actual end of the fight did not come for another twenty minutes, and in those twenty minutes Mr. Shivers suffered the tortures of the

damned multiplied by infinity. Not only was the bird he was handling going down to game and glorious defeat, but Mr. Shivers possessed the numbing knowledge that it was Luscius' bird that was losing!

He stood in petrified horror and watched his own bird, handled by Luscius, drive home every stroke into the one that Luscius should have been handling. It didn't seem to afford common amusement to the victorious gamecock.

The end came. The birds were pitted and for the solemn count of ten Mr. Shivers' bird made no offensive motion. The owners handled them for thirty seconds, then pitted them again. The referee again counted ten, and again Mr. Shivers' bird lay supine. Once again they handled their birds for thirty seconds, and this time the count went to twenty. It was a slow, dignified impressive count. Florian Slappey gave his verdict:

"Luscius Chester's bird wins the fight, an' I declares all bets payable according!"

Luscius' gamecock had won! But Mr. Shivers knew that Luscius' gamecock had lost. The irony of it appalled. He cursed the men who had plied him with the advice that had caused him to swap the birds. He railed to himself against Boston Marble and every other man who had expressed confidence in Gaffer.

Gaffer! Huh! Swell fighter Gaffer was — not!

Only once in the entire fight had his spurs been driven home. He had battled gamely, true — but hopelessly.

Two or three times in the immediate past Mr. Shivers had fancied that he rubbed elbows with misery. He realized now that he had been stranger to it. He saw the victorious Luscious pick up his bird, walk over to Spinola and shake hands with her in a proprietary manner. He glimpsed Spinola's smile of welcoming love, pride and surrender. He knew that she knew that she was smiling upon her future husband.

The world was a sad and dreary place for Mr. Shivers. To lose the fight, Spinola and all his money was bad enough. But to know that his bird had really won and that he had robbed himself of the fruits of victory was fairly killing.

Mr. Shivers passed a shaking hand across a perspiring, aching brow. He turned on his heel, gave vent to one relieving spurt of classic profanity and departed.

And that night Luscious Chester called upon Mrs. Spinola Reed. He was the same old Luscious — uncouth and honest in victory as he had been before. He wore his old suit and what was left of the felt hat with which he had helped train Gaffer. Timidly, awkwardly, he claimed his reward.

Spinola was a woman of her word. She was also a woman of action. She threw plump rounded

arms about the neck of the now adored Luscious and implanted an impassioned betrothal kiss upon his lips. Luscious trembled from head to over-large feet and returned the favour with interest. Five minutes later—an ecstatic five minutes—they found themselves able to converse. Spinola started it.

“Is you happy, Luscious?”

“Happy? I reckon I is the happies’ man what is.”

“Hones’ an’ true?”

“Cross my heart. An’ is you happy, Spinola, hon?”

“I sholy is, Luscious. Mos’ ontirely happy.”

“Absotively?”

“We-e-ll”—Spinola was nothing if not honest—“they is jes’ one lil teeny ’ception, Luscious. On’y jes’ one.”

“What it is, sweetness?”

“Not meanin’ to hu’t yo’ feelin’s none, Luscious, I is got to say that while you is a swell feller an’ is gwine make me a good easy husban’, I does kinder wish you had a li’l mo’ brains!”

And then Luscious laughed.

“Brains!” he echoed. “Brains! Why, hon, brains is the on’y thing I ain’t got anythin’ else but! An’ I c’n prove it.”

She shook her head sceptically. “Well?”

“’Twas bouten this cockfight, sweetness. You see, I knowed all the time that Trojan di’n’t have

no chance to beat Gaffer an' t'other day I heard that lots of folks had been tellin' Mistuh Shivers he di'n't have no chance. So I think it over and figgered out that Mistuh Shivers was in so deep he'd try to swap Trojan fo' Gaffer, countin' they look jes' alike. An' all night befo' las' an' las' night I set up an' watched. Sho' nuff, 'long 'bout one 'clock this mawnin' along he comes an' leaves Trojan an' takes Gaffer. An' I ain't said a word to him while he been doin' it — b'lieve me not, cause'n I is got brains, I is. But I follied him home and after he got to sleep good I slipped into his coop, put Trojan back where he belonged at an' take'n my Gaffer home with me.

“Co'se, Mistuh Shivers, thinkin' he had Gaffer, bet a heap mo' money an' I sent out an' covered his bets. An' today when Gaffer won — he was thinkin' all the time it was Trojan which was winnin'. It's gwine do him good to think that way fo' a while. An' now, Spinola, does you still 'sist that I ain't got no brains?”

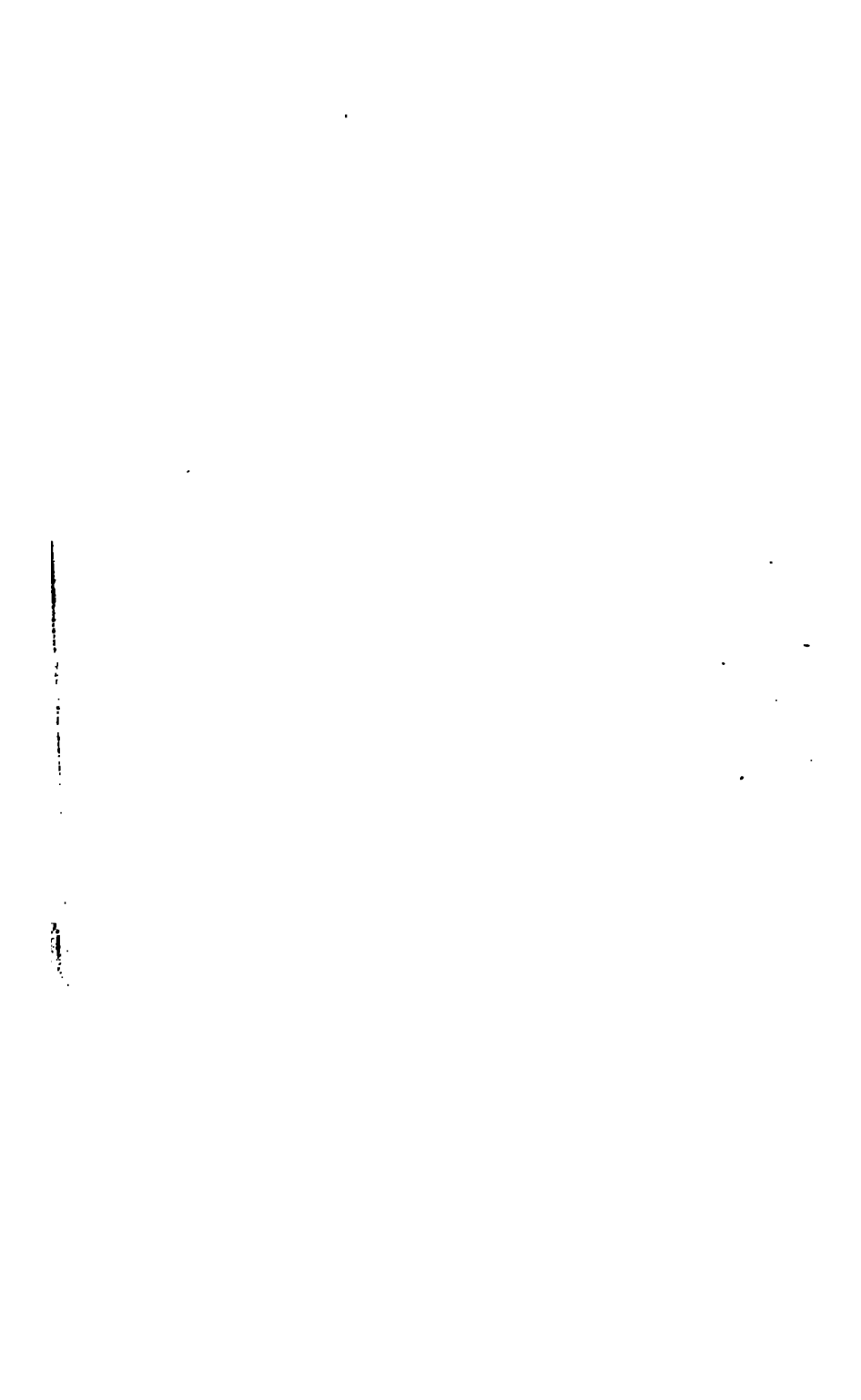
She gazed upon him with a new wide-eyed pride. Then she snuggled closer and slipped his arm about her waist.

“Luscious,” said she softly, “I is tee-totally misjudget you. You — you is got so much brains I is positively skeered of you. As for Mistuh Shivers” — pensively — “I wonder where he is at now?”

Luscious grinned.

“Him? I reckon he’s preparin’ to eat Trojan fo’ dinner! An’ it’s gwine be a pow’ful tough meal!”

THE END



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